

## Zadie Xa and Jessica Taylor in Conversation

Recorded live on 15 May 2020

For the exhibition 'I am a heart beating in the world: Diaspora Pavilion 2, Sydney'

Presented by International Curators Forum (ICF) & 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art

**Summary keywords:** video, moving image, film, textile, sculpture, performance, music, exhibition, marine, ocean, ecology, mythology, folklore, shamanism, nationhood, homeland, diaspora, environment, korea, vancouver, icf, 4a

**Jessica Taylor:** Hi everybody. I am here speaking with Zadie Xa, who will be one of six artists exhibiting in the Diaspora Pavilion 2 exhibition, *I am a heart beating in the world* to be presented by International Curators Forum in partnership with 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in Sydney, Australia.

Through performance, video, painting and textiles Zadie explores the overlapping and conflation of cultures that inform self-conceptualised identities and notions of self. Her layered textile works are sites for exploring contemporary identity construction, and performance through cultural sampling, informed by her own experience within the Asian diaspora. Zadie's intricate hands sewn, wearable, performable garments stitch together, a range of personally relevant imagery, sourced from music, digital space, fashion and art history. Zadie has developed a system of personalised semiotics that propose entirely new images and objects, creating a personal visual language for articulating nuanced Asian identity narratives, which are frequently situated within fantastical or supernatural realms.



Image: Installation view *Feedback Loops*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (2020).

Alt text: A large textile work hanging from the ceiling of the gallery next to a large screen with projection.

I am Jessica Taylor, ICF's Head of Programmes, and one of the curators of the exhibition in Sydney. And later we will hear from artists, Daniella Yohannes and Abdul-Rahman Abdullah and curators Adelaide Bannerman, and Mikala Tai. Hi Zadie, how are you?

**Zadie Xa:** I'm doing okay, thanks.

**Jessica Taylor:** It's nice to see you digitally.

**Zadie Xa:** Nice to see you as well.

**Jessica Taylor:** I wanted to get started by looking at the place where the exhibition departs from, which is diaspora as a concept. And for the project we approach it as a kind of nuanced, provisional and personal cultural experience. And what I'm particularly interested in from your perspective is that you seem to approach diaspora, not so much as an experience or a state of being, but as a place or a space.

And I've seen you refer to diaspora using terms such as a middle ground, a third space, an orbit or an inherited place. And I get the sense that you actively resist the idea of diaspora simply as living between places or cultural identities, and instead through your practice construct diaspora as a physical or inhabited space through which you can carve out for yourself a personal relationship to home or homeland.

So, it'd be great to hear from you how you do approach diaspora in your work, as well as how you conceive of and reimagine notions of home and homeland. And I'm also curious to know if for you home has the capacity to be somewhere tangible or if it's something ever changing.

**Zadie Xa:** Let's just go off with the last thing that you just spoke about, about home being something that's ever changing, or if it's something that's tangible. I think that home means different things for so many people and for me, it's always been a really contested idea because I've never really felt at home with anything or rather, I've never really felt like I've ever really belonged. And so, this is a state of being or feeling since I was a very small child growing up in Vancouver, Canada, but even now I think moving around from country to country for the past eight years, whilst I feel good in the places I've been or some places feel more homelike because of the network of friends you might have, I think for me, it's always a shifting state or something that's never really attainable. And the way I've been able to think about that within my own practice or the way I manage to handle it, let's say in my life, through my practice is through a memory palace.

So, most of my work is constructed through nostalgic feelings, nostalgic memories, things that are sometimes tainted with sentiment or emotion, but also things from

my childhood, listening to folk tales from my mom or watching certain television programs. And I think inevitably I've just been able to stitch those things together. And when I think about these spaces or when I'm creating worlds within my studio, these are the things that I most identify with a sense of home, but it's a really a tenuous question for me because I'm not really sure.

I don't even really know how to answer that question. I think because most of the time it's like a state of thinking or wandering or meandering about, and trying to wade through these murky waters, where sometimes you get flashes of clarity and then all of a sudden it goes away and you're enmeshed within darkness again. And I don't mean that from a negative perspective as in you're shrouded in darkness, but it's a confusing state. And maybe it's the way that most people should feel, because I feel that the way I approach home and homeland is very anti-nationalistic and goes against the idea of demarcated borders and lines of situated nationhoods and states of being through identity construction - if that makes any sense.



Image: Still from *Child of Magohalmi and the Echoes of Creation* (2019). Single Channel video.

Alt text: A performer stands in front of the ocean wearing a mask and intricate textile full-length coat.

**Jessica Taylor:** Yeah, I think diasporic experience is something that enables us to transcend this idea of the construction of national borders and understand it as a much more complex process of wandering, as you say, and I get the sense that in your rejection of the construction of nationhood and as a strategy for negotiating, that diasporic experience, you enact a process in your work of world-building. Could you talk a bit more about that, this process of constructing a world and how you came to that methodology in your practice?

**Zadie Xa:** Even constructing a world, even if it is fictional, it still comes with a lot of issues because I am pulling from lived experience. I was born in Vancouver, and when you are the child of immigrants, essentially you are in a place within two worlds, so to speak. You have your “inherited country,” and I put that heavily in

quotations, and then your motherland, we might like to call it. And that's one narrative that some first, second or third generation Canadian or Americans might think about. But what I've been thinking about a lot since I was a really young child, was how do you contend with that immigrant story when you are also someone whose family willingly went to another country that was built upon colonial genocide? This is something that I wonder if a lot of first or second-generation Canadians think about. If so, how they contend with those things, because they're very conflicting feelings. On one hand, for myself anyways, it's obviously something I condemn and I don't even know how you reflect on that type of violence, but it's something that I also must understand as something that I'm also enmeshed in and it's something that I've benefited from, you know? So, it's the understanding that as people from Vancouver you are residing on unceded territories of Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Peoples.

So that's a whole other kind of thing that I've had to contend with when I'm thinking about these marine ecologies that I identify with - it's in the landscape where this kind of abstract homeland for me exists, but then also having to contend with - even in my fictional world, in my narrative fantasy for myself - that this is the backdrop, and it never belonged to me and it doesn't necessarily belong to people who identify as Canadians on a country that for most people or some people that live there, is called Turtle Island. And these are even terminologies that most Canadians are not aware of. I had to learn these things too. These are not things that you were taught when you were in high school or even in university. Things probably have changed a lot since I was there - it's been 10 years since I lived in Canada - but it's really murky.

And these are things that I didn't initially think about when I first started immersing myself in the idea of what it is to live in and amongst the Asian diaspora, the East Asian diaspora, the Korean diaspora, the Korean Canadian diaspora. I think in the beginning there was a real yearning to retrace familial ancestral roots home in a way, because it's something that I never allowed myself to do as a young child. This is a very familiar story of what a lot of people who are within diaspora communities think about. But for me, it's also having to contend with the fact that my family has benefited as immigrants to a country where that economic wealth has been placed upon the backs of indigenous people. And so, this is something new that I'm having to think about. And I think about it a lot in my personal life, but I'm not really sure how I'm going to weave those narratives into my practice yet, but it's something that I've been thinking a lot about. So, I guess diaspora is always really messy and confusing because it's an individual experience.

And as someone living in the diaspora, you're also going to veer away from tradition, right? You're going to move away from that because that is not a natural lived experience - you are essentially taken from the cloth of something that we might

deem original, that has contentious claims to it as well, but then you shift and you mutate and you transmute and you mix and mingle with other things that you're exposed to.

So, I think that's really how I think about my work, even when I'm just constructing physical works and I'm not actually conceptualizing those ideas. That ideas of hybridity and collage really come together within the actual production of my work. Irrespective of that is working with sound, working collaboratively with performance with other dancers or musicians, working collaboratively with my partner on sculptures or even taking references from traditional folk clothing in Korea and mixing that with popular culture fashion from the nineties that I grew up on and I heavily identify with not only because it's nostalgic, but because of the way in which a lot of those garments were pieced together when we were kids in the nineties or in the early two thousands. I remember growing up, people would put different patches all over their jackets to voice what group they were a part of - whether that was listening to specific bands or hip-hop groups, or if you aligned yourself with specific underground brands. People still do that today, that's just what the fashion industry is. So, I think that's a large part of how I think about the work in general and that's not just through garment making, but it runs along through my entire practice. That's weaving together disparate pieces of information that have come from different places culturally and putting them together.

And sometimes it works and sometimes there are frictions, but I think it's important to acknowledge those frictions when we're thinking about hybridity as well, it's not always clean.



Image: *Child of Magohalmi and the Echoes of Creation* (2019), wall-based textile work.

Alt text: A textile work featuring an intricate border and a masked goddess emerging from the waves.

**Jessica Taylor:** And how do you negotiate this process of undergoing this cultural sampling, of bringing these references together? Some of them have a historical connection – you're looking at Korean shamanism and folklore – some have these very contemporary cultural references that you mentioned. In constructing these narratives that are so complex and very personal, and then undergoing that process of bringing other performers and a wider international public into that dialogue, is that something you think about, or is it something that you relinquish control over and allow to take on a different life?

**Zadie Xa:** I definitely think about it all the time and it's something that actually really terrifies me. Not working with people, that's the best part about it. But when you have narratives, that not only are personal - I think I don't mind putting myself in that vulnerable position, although I think at moments I have felt embarrassed, I feel like I'm really putting myself out there to be vulnerable - but it's more because there are references to specific cultures, to traditional Korean folk culture. And I think that for me as a Canadian, who is very aware that I claim a home country that is not mine, to constantly understand that you are an outsider and to be very sensitive about those things. So, whilst I gravitate towards traditional Korean folk culture, I also feel like it's not mine. I feel like I'm always coming to these things as an outsider. For two reasons - One, because I am an outsider, these are not things that I learned about firsthand, these are things I had to find my way to or things that were familiar to me as a young child but not something that permeated within my lifestyle, let's say. And two, because as you say, when you are presenting these things on an international stage, where there might be other people who are not so familiar with Korean culture or people that come with their own host of stereotypes or other Asian people or other Korean people, diasporic Korean people who may really object to what you're doing or feel like, 'Oh, this is weird or this is wrong, or this has friction or this doesn't make sense.'

And so, I think because I'm sensitive, those things do worry me, but at the same time, because I'm honest, if there are stumbles or mistakes, I'm willing to address those things. And I feel like it's a more honest way of actually working through these ideas. Because as I said before, working in this diasporic orbit is messy, right?

It's like this idea of the purity of traditional foods. I listened to a Korean chef speak about this a few years ago on a podcast and he had a restaurant, say in Koreatown, and there was a traditional Korean soup that they served. Some people from Korea would say, 'well, this isn't a real Korean soup,' because it doesn't have the actual herbs or vegetables that are grown in that village in said place in South Korea. And instead it's garnished with local carrots or whatever's growing there. And how I feel and what the chef said as well, is that it doesn't make that bowl of soup any less Korean. It just becomes different. It's transformed. It's had to exist within this space

that it sprung forth from, but that doesn't make it any less valid or any less real. And just the whole idea growing up as a child, 'Are you a real Asian, or are you not?' These are questions that I think about still within my work. And it's taken me a very long time to realise that's a complete fallacy and to push against that centralism, which I think is really important, but also at the same time, I don't even know what it means to be a real Korean and what type of Korean I am.

I'm kind of existing in a space that doesn't always look really clean. It looks like a lot of different things because it's just the experience of where I've lived, of the art or popular cultural references that I have within the Rolodex of my brain.



Image: Performance for *Child of Magohalmi and the Echo of Creation* (2019), 3-hour durational live performance, Tramway, Glasgow.

Alt text: A performer dances in front of a sculpture of an orca and projections on the walls of the galleries.

**Jessica Taylor:** So, I find that your work creates this really wonderful sense of questioning this boundary between real and fiction. I think it plays with where that boundary is, and some of the things that we consider tangible and real. You know, the very question of these essentialised notions of nationhood, through a lens that prioritises nature and older stories that we have less knowledge of, less fact around, and how you can bring these things together to question what is real and what is not.

And if we even need to be able to establish where fact comes over folklore or myth, and there's this brilliant line that I wanted to bring up from your most recent film, "Within the culture of all animals, there exists a multitude of origin stories with many new ones uncovered each day." And then you say, "The suppression of factual fictions cannot hold."

And for me that epitomises this really important relationship between fact and fiction in your work. And I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what factual fictions means to you?

**Zadie Xa:** That quote - I thought about it because that particular work was riffing off of that kind of a lost creation myth in Korean folklore. And within Korean mythology, there's a lot of different stories of cosmology and the origins of the universe and the world, as there are in every single culture in the world obviously. And so, for me, I didn't want to claim that the story I was presenting had precedence over any other story. It was a nod to the fact that a lot of these origin stories all over the world, they have place and they have weight.

And then for me, factual fictions, it's really interesting what you just said about 'how do we discern what is fact and what's fiction' and just thinking about the history of humans and whose voice or whose figure gets to be included in that. Those who have been included, what embellishments have been made. And so, it then becomes even more murky and we don't really know.

There was this artist in London who maybe about five years ago - she probably wouldn't even remember that she said it because we were just talking in conversation - and she was talking about her own ancestral history and how there's many gaps in that past because of colonialism and because of the enslaved histories of peoples. And then she said to me, 'and because there's those gaps, it's really important that I fill them in, that I create my own truth.' And that really stayed with me. I don't even think she was trying to be profound in that moment, but it really, really struck me. And at that moment, I just thought, this is really the way it is. I have a very different family background, but there are a lot of things that are shrouded in mystery or things that I don't know, as we all do. And I think in order to see one's self clearly you have to really understand your history. And if you do have gaps in that, I think it's very important to rebuild those things and self-mythologise, not as a way to lie to yourself, but to really kind of figure out the essence of who you think you are, who you know you are. And I think that when you have those gaps, that is the most tragic thing to not know who you are.

That's a very redundant way to say things, but that's what factual fictions really means to me - you create your truth. That's really what I'm doing with my work, even though a lot of times I don't even realise that it's about me and maybe it's not even really about me, but maybe it's a way for me to better understand myself. Going back to the idea of a memory palace, of constructing different phases in my life of who I thought I was or where I could go. I think that's the best way I can put it because I've never once felt like, 'Oh, I've got this figured out. I know exactly what I'm doing.' A lot of times I am really fumbling. There might be things that I know I what I want it to look like after I've made it in the studio, but, oftentimes I don't



really know. And this is another reason why performance has become really important and integral within my work. Because up until the moment things happen or until things have actually unfolded and you have time to look back on these things, you don't really know what's going to go on because you don't have full control.



Image: Still from *Child of Magohalmi and the Echoes of Creation* (2019) Single Channel video.

Alt text: A blue hand moves an orca figurine through a light pink body of water.

**Jessica Taylor:** Yeah, I was thinking about the ways in which some of the things that you speak about through your work - this process of shapeshifting, looking at ocean ecologies as a lens through which to talk about some of these things, and then also that physical process through the creating of your textiles, and in the exhibition in Sydney we will have two of your textiles hanging in the space. But then also this entire other life that they have when they are activated through performance and what happens to them when a body puts them on. Do you think at all about new things you might want to do in performance in the future, given that your performance work has transformed so much in the last couple of years? Do you think about next steps or are you really enjoying this interplay between mediums at this moment?

**Zadie Xa:** I'm always thinking about blue sky projects with performance. About the really interesting collaborative relationships that I might be able to forge with new artists. At the moment I'm working on a few different projects and I've been thinking about how I might introduce a performative threading throughout that work. And each project is really individual, and a lot of times I work with narrative as you've said. And so sometimes I have that narrative set before I know exactly what I want to do.

But one of the things that I have been thinking about for a long time is figuring out a way in which I can weave hip hop, deejaying, or sampling with a traditional drummer

that I always work with, and how I might incorporate operatic singing, but mixed in with a type of traditional Korean folk singing. But those are things that I've been thinking about for a few years. I think a lot of times it's just finding the right people that might be able to share a certain vision together. But at the same time, one of the things that I'd really like to do is figure out a way that I can work with other artists who might also work within traditional folk narratives where their families come from. I think it would be really interesting to do a cross pollination of works and figure out how that might work tonally or narrative-wise or visually. What those multiple worlds could create. I think that would be really interesting, and again it's about finding the right synergy with another artist. But yes, it's something that I've been thinking about a lot.

One of the things that I'd really like to do in the future - going off on tangent a little bit - I'd really love to work with like a scientist who goes out and does field recordings of animals. I would love to work with the scientists that do hydroponic recordings of different cetacean species, like humpback whales and orcas, that's something that I would really like to do in the future thinking about the ways sound and sound within the ocean reverberate.

And there's a lot of different artists who I'm close with who also think about those things from a totally different perspective, but those are maybe future collaborative works that I would also like to make happen, even though they have no idea.

**Jessica Taylor:** That's brilliant and I look forward to it. I have one more question in relation to that - now that you've made two films, one in Korea and one in Canada - How do you feel that process of working in each place has informed the works themselves?

**Zadie Xa:** When I went to Korea and I was filming, I was a complete outsider. I don't know if one would be able to gauge that from just watching the film, because there's just so many different disparate clips and people might not even know where those places are, but I think just for me as the artist, it's realising that if you want to make a film that's located geographically somewhere, you need to spend more time. I feel like they were really good surface scratchings and that I would need much more time and more research to learn the language. My Korean is very bad. I grew up with Korean, but very quickly as a prepubescent team decided it was just not something I wanted to spend my Saturdays doing. And so that's something that's really important for me. I would love to film again in Korea, but I would definitely need to spend between three and six months there, and that's not even that much time, it wouldn't be a film, it would be an artist video that would be between 20 minutes to an hour.

In Vancouver, that was a really great experience because I understand those local beaches so well. We didn't go into the wilderness, we went to local beaches that are near my mom's house and it was really nice because I was able to make the work with her, which actually meant a lot for me because her voice is also present within that the video work retracing these steps to this kind of cosmic Korean grandmother goddess. And then also explaining to my mom why these things were really important and why it was important for her voice to be within that work.

So, it's an interesting thing because when we went to Jeju Island, my mother also came with me and she helped facilitate that work as well. But it means many things when you make work that is conceptually rooted within the place that you make it.

And I think for me, both of those places were really, really special, but definitely just only scratched the surface with those two works. And definitely we need to revisit those and go again. And I think also getting multiple voices involved. I think one of the criticisms I would have for some of those works was the singular focus. I guess you could say this about most artists' works, we're very egocentric, so it's a very singular focus on what those worlds are. But if we were to talk about, let's say, the film made in Vancouver, the narrative of that story was more generally based on a Korean goddess figure, but I think it would be interesting to think about localised history and how that could collapse with the factual fiction within a mythological Korea that I was also thinking about.

This is something that I'm working towards with some new work, but, again, very important for me that things are not very on the nose, that they're not didactic but submerged within layers so that things are still laying within the scope of being poetic, I suppose.

**Jessica Taylor:** Great, thank you so much. Thank you for joining me. It was great to catch up and get to ask some of these questions that I have been thinking about as I encounter more and more of your work, and I hope that we get to have a chance to chat in person soon.

**Zadie Xs:** Yeah, we will. We will. We're speaking in person now.

Images courtesy Zadie Xa. For more information on the discussed works, please visit <https://www.zadiexa.com/>