

Andréa Spearman: Dancers' Group is experimenting with new ways to unify, strengthen, and amplify voices in the Bay Area. We're excited to share a variety of ideas and stories.

In today's recording of *In Conversation*, you will hear from Claudine Naganuma and Selma Apará.

Claudine is a teacher and Program Director for Dance for Parkinson's disease [[Dance for PD®](#)] program at Danspace. She's the director of [dNaga Dance Company](#) and created [The PEACE Project](#) in 2009 to explore finding personal peace through the lens of those living with Parkinson's disease. Oh! She wears so many hats in the community. She also founded [The GIRL Project](#) in 2014, which offers dance and empowerment classes for 11 to 14-year-old girls in East Oakland. And she also served as the Artistic Director of the Asian American Dance Performances from 1992-2004. Oh! So busy, we love it.

Selma Louise Apará grew up in the African dance community following after her older sisters who are professional dancers as well. She has studied so many different styles such hip hop, jazz, ballet, modern, and many other dance styles from the African diaspora, including samba. Ooh, she's a renaissance woman! [Selma laughs] She's danced with Dimensions Extensions Performance Ensemble in Oakland and also attended AileyCamp at UC Berkeley. She's currently a junior at Bishop O'Dowd High School, where she cultivates her love for being in front of a crowd as a member of the varsity cheer team, the drama department, and as student body Vice President. Yes ma'am! We love a woman in government.

Welcome you two! What's going on for today?

Claudine Naganuma: Thank you! It's so great to be in conversation with you, Selma. We met quite a while ago. Do you remember when your first year was at GIRL Project?

Selma Apará: I think it was fifth grade? Yeah, I believe it was fifth grade. I remember my mom and I were leaving some event at EastSide Arts Alliance and my mom - she always picks up a bunch of different, random flyers when we're anywhere and I started doing the same - but she found this one flyer, it was like "GIRL Project over Spring Break. Girls in the East Bay/Bay Area, come and learn dance and art and leave with a free bike at the end!" That really caught our eye, so we're like, "Okay cool, let's go." I think that was 20... how old am I right now? You know, I don't know, but I know it was fifth grade.

Claudine: Yeah, so GIRL Project originally started just as a dance workshop and then I really quickly found that girls were saying that they really wanted to find a safe space to hang out, safe space to play. And yeah, I think you came in maybe the second year or something, but I remember you were going to Ile Omode.

Selma: Yes, yes, I was going to Ile Omode. I started at Ile Omode in fourth grade and I went all the way up to eighth grade. That's the last year; I graduated there. Yeah, I miss them. [laughs]

Claudine: And I know that you were studying a lot of African dance. Can you talk a little bit about the influence that your sisters had on you and the spaces that you were in and also the dance classes that were offered at Ile Omode as well?

Selma: Yes, well my two older sisters, Kulwa and Kehinde Apará, they're twins. They and their mother, my Titi Nsoroma James, they are professional dancers and had been in the African dance community for my sisters' entire lives and their mom had got them into it, mostly at the [Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts](#) down in downtown Oakland. A lot of times when I was younger when I would be with them, they would take me to dance class with them and I just remember sitting on the floor and hearing all the drums and all the people dancing around me. And I remember [laughs] when the drums were playing, I could feel the bass going almost at the same rhythm as my heart, so I always used to think that was really cool. And then as I got older, they would pull me out on the floor with them. I would be a little shy at first, you know, but it's just a really great community and then when I ended up at Ile Omode, we would have African dance classes there too. At first, we would do jazz, hip hop, and African dance because our teacher Mama Taiwo Kujichagalia, she and her sister Kehinde Kujichagalia (they're all still professional dancers), they would teach us a bunch of different dance styles, but then later we were just taught African by Baba Nimely Napla. It was a really great experience to be able to learn West African dance because it's really fun and I feel like it's the style of dance that I feel the most free doing.

Claudine: Nice, nice. And then when you came to GIRL Project, I know that Dr. Albirda Rose was teaching Dunham for us during that time.

Selma: Yes.

Claudine: So tell me, what do you love about dance?

Selma: I feel like I really love everything about dance to be honest. The main thing that I really love about performing dance, what I love about performing other stuff like theater too, is just making people feel good from something that you do. While you're onstage - if you can see the audience because usually the house is dark, but if you can see the audience - seeing people's faces light up, or people being so excited to see you after the show, or even when I'm just dancing in my room. It's hard to really be sad when you're dancing, even if you're dancing at a sad event, maybe like a funeral or something. Or even if you start dancing in a bad mood, it's hard to end unhappy when you're dancing. I feel like that's one of the main things I love about it.

Claudine: Yes, that community aspect, huh? Working together in ensemble.

Selma: Yes.

Claudine: You were telling me about dancing samba and catching your friend's gaze in the eyeballs and just being like "Wow." That powerful moment.

Selma: Yes! Freshman year, back when we were on campus and everything, for my school's multicultural assembly, I did a samba dance and just this one part I was looking out in the audience and then I made eye contact with my friend! She was just smiling so much and it just really felt so good to have somebody out there supporting you and to see that what you're doing up there on that stage is making somebody happy, you know?

Claudine: Yeah, yeah. So at EastSide, when we offered GIRL Project in person, I mean we're still trying to offer hang-out sessions and we're doing classes on Zoom now, but when we were in person, you wrote a beautiful poem. One of the things that we're trying to do is offer all different kinds of activities so dance activities, improvisation, theater, visual arts, safety, urban planning, and just talking about each person's power and how you can transform your environment and your community. I would like to play this short little poem that you wrote and maybe you can talk a little bit about it.

Selma: Okay.

[Claudine plays recording of Selma reading her poem]

[background music starts]

Selma:

Whenever a child is born, their parents are provided with a handbook of little lessons to teach them.

Look both ways before you cross the street.

Always say please and thank you.

Don't take candy from strangers.

But for some children, these lessons are different.

On the East side of town, Black parents must teach their daughters a different set of rules.

No matter how excited you get, do not use your hands while you talk.

Don't express your opinion on society's issues. Leave that to your brothers. It's already hard enough to get them heard.

Don't get too loud, too happy, too sad and don't ever (God forbid) don't you ever, ever get angry. It's too intimidating, especially with your size.

Developing early? Cover it up! Because if you have it, people automatically know that you use it.

Keep your head down and them dishes up.

Smile, it makes you seem less aggressive.

And please straighten your hair, it makes everyone more comfortable.

Be present but never occupy that much space.

And if you have a problem with it, nobody cares.

[end of recording]

[Editor's note: This work was created at dNaga's GIRL Project workshop at EastSide Cultural Center by Selma Apará and was guided by spoken word artist M'kala Payton. Music by Miles Davis.]

Claudine: Yeah.

[both laugh]

Claudine: You were kind of young when you wrote that.

Selma: I was! So I'm 16 right now, I think that was the last time I was at GIRL Project. I think I was 13 when I wrote that. That's crazy.

Claudine: It is crazy. Tell me about it: Do you feel it's still relevant? Is it more relevant? What's up?

Selma: It definitely is still relevant. The things I was talking about, just of being a Black girl in society. But I'm just really thinking back on that. I'm kind of proud of my younger self for really being able to notice those things and express those things. It's gotten better, like there's been a lot more spaces for Black girls, Black women to express their voices. Especially through GIRL Project too. That's one thing I loved about going to GIRL Project, because it wasn't *just* for dance. Really when I look through my life, it's one of the only places where I felt 100% comfortable to be my complete authentic self at all times, where I didn't feel like I had to hold anything back or chill out, you know what I mean? Not say something because I was scared of what somebody would say or something like that. I feel like I never felt that there so that's probably why at 13, I was able to express those feelings and really say what I had seen.

Claudine: Aww. Well, that really makes me feel good. Thanks, Selma. We really are trying to strive to create a space where everyone feels supported and it's true! You know, I think that many of us are expected to do our best all the time and be a strong person, and kids don't really have an opportunity to be kids. We can get tired too, right?

Selma: Right.

Claudine: And sometimes our best doesn't look that great and that has to be okay too. If we're always giving 100%, then what do we got? We're depleted. So that's an important thing for us to be able to support each other and a really important thing is to develop a circle of sisterhood.

[music]

Andréa: We're back with *In Conversation* with Claudine and Selma. Thanks for listening!

Claudine: You know one of the things that I'm really proud of is that you went on to do the [AileyCamp](#) and I was just so proud of you.

Selma: Thank you!

Claudine: Can you talk a little bit about that experience and then you ended up winning an award at the end of that workshop?

Selma: Yes! AileyCamp was really so fun. You can ask anybody who's gone through the program any year. It's really one of the best experiences somebody can have in their life. You only get to go once, and I see why because first of all, it's free but if it wasn't free, the teaching that we get, the food that we get ('cause we're on UC Berkeley's campus and we're eating with the college students), and the dance supplies, the clothes and everything, it would be almost \$3,000, \$5,000 a kid? But we get all of that experience for free. We learn different styles of dance. We did ballet, jazz, West African with Mama Naomi, modern. When it was my year, our modern dance teacher was Mr. Derrick [Minter]. He passed away - rest in peace Mr. Derrick - he was such a great teacher. He was so funny. I feel like he's definitely one of the people who I'm always going to remember in my life. He was so inspiring. What else did we learn? I think I named all the styles that we did, but outside of dance, we also had a poetry class, like spoken word and we did a personal development class where we could really be vulnerable and just talk about different stuff going on. Honestly it was a great experience. It was a really, really great experience.

Claudine: Lovely, and what was the award that you ended up winning?

Selma: It's a shame that I don't remember the name of the award. I think...

Claudine: Most Promising Student or something like that.

Selma: Well, it was the first year. When I had got it, it was the first year that it was done. Basically, if there was a Camper of the Year award, that's basically what it would be. It's a scholarship to pay for any type of arts training that a student wants to do. You could do dance, you could go into theater, you could do visual arts and with my scholarship, it took me a whole year to find a place but I ended up dancing with SWEAT [Contemporary Dance Academy] for about a year. I was taught by a woman named by Ms. Maia [Siani]. She's really great, I need to call her and just say hi. I ended up being able to further my dance training so it was an honor to receive that scholarship because I really loved AileyCamp. It was so fun. It was really an amazing experience.

Claudine: And I would just really love it if you could tell me a little bit about your experience when you were at [Dimensions \[Dance Theater\]](#).

Selma: Well I went to the Rights of Passage program for Dimensions in the summer of 2016, I believe, yes because I was going into 7th grade. The summer of 2016 I danced in the Rights of Passage program. I think I danced in every single dance class! [laughs] I did African, jazz, ballet on Wednesdays, hip hop on Thursdays, and then Haitian on Fridays. I remember that it was a

great experience. And then at the end of the summer Ms. Latanya and Ms. Sonya asked me to come, and they wanted to know if I wanted to join the youth dance troupe, Dimensions Extensions Performance Ensemble, and that was a wonderful experience. I met some great girls who a lot of them I still talk to today. Basically I danced with them from 2017 to the end of 2018. Then I went and switched over to theater. What we would do, we would go and perform at different events and a lot of people would know who we were which felt really great. I was like, “Oh yeah, I’m dancing, I’m really dancing *a lot*.” I really loved it so much. I learned a lot. It helped me strengthen my dancing and really get a sense of sisterhood. We didn’t just do dance either, you know, we would have a lot of sit-down talks, talk about stuff that’s going on in the world. They really helped us grow into really just some great young women. We learned different life skills. It was just a really great experience.

[music]

Andréa: We’re back with *In Conversation* with Claudine and Selma. Thanks for listening!

Claudine: As you’re talking I realized I’ve been to your performances since you’ve been quite young.

[both laugh]

So one of the things we talked a little bit about was the dance field and what’s next, right, or what’s missing, or what kind of things do we want to see. You were talking a little bit about Rihanna’s fashion show. Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

Selma: Yes. If you don’t know, Rihanna has her lingerie and other types of underwear line, Savage X Fenty. She recently had [a fashion show](#), I think it was this summer. She had a fashion show, and she had models from different ethnicities, different skin colors, different sizes, different gender identities. It’s really the most diverse of anything I’ve seen in my life of any dance performance, any movie, any show. Literally the most diverse piece of art I’ve ever seen in my life. I saw this one Twitter post, this man had said, “This is the first time I’ve ever seen a model that looks like me.” He’s a chubbier Black man, and he was like, “This is the first time I’ve ever seen a model who looks like me modeling some underwear.” So, she just had people of all different shapes and sizes, skin colors, different places, gender identities, and I think it was so beautiful. So *that* is what I want to see in dance. The dance world has gotten better, in my opinion, in terms of how different types of women are able to be shown. We have bigger girls doing ballet, we have very petite people on stage. We’ve gotten much better with that, I’ve seen. But the fashion show made me realize that I don’t think I’ve ever seen a larger man or boy doing ballet, or I don’t think I’ve ever seen them do anything but hip hop. I feel like it’s not really shown that yes, you can do this if you want to, you know. Or even with people who don’t identify with a specific gender. I don’t think I’ve been able to see anybody like that really showcased in dance. It’s always like you’re either a girl and you’re in this dress, or you’re a boy and you’re in this suit and you’re picking up the girl. I don’t think I’ve seen it where people don’t have to be bound by those roles. So that’s something that I feel like I really want to see.

Claudine: Yeah! In various ways, I think people in the field have been trying to do that but we need people like you and the future: you and others who are out there now trying to do more.

When I was directing Asian American Dance Performances, that organization was actually created in 1974, the first Asian American [dance] organization in the country actually.

Selma: Oh wow.

Claudine: At that time there were not that many Asian American dancers being seen. When I came on later on, there were more dancers, but there really weren't very many dancemakers. Just how powerful it is to see ourselves on stage, and it also brings up the complexities. You know, when we say Asian Americans that includes a lot of people. That includes Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, sometimes refers to Pacific Islanders, Hmong, Vietnamese, Cambodians, there's so many folks that are lumped into that category. Then we have new immigrants, first generation through fifth, sixth, seventh generation. So sometimes we can all get lumped in, but one of the things that I was trying to do was create a platform for people to represent themselves. In some ways that's kind of what's happening with my Parkinson's project. I feel like stories need to be told by the folks who have Parkinson's, right?

Selma: Right.

Claudine: So how do we have more visibility? After I talked with you I did watch the fashion show, and I really appreciated it. I loved how everything, the costumes actually moved with the dancers. I was like, "Wow, nothing is falling out, that works pretty well." One of the things that I do want to make sure is that young women don't feel like there has to be that sexualization in order to be validated. I find especially working with GIRL Project, I've heard so many girls complain about even going to the store, the variety of clothes that one can get when you're a kid: crop tops or short shorts or "Juicy" on the booty. We need to in a more holistic way accept bodies of all types. But shout out to Rihanna for doing such a good job with having such a diverse cast, and we need to make sure that we take into consideration that we're living in a patriarchal society, as well. Yeah, so that's my thought about that.

I don't know if you have any thoughts about that, Selma, or if you wanted to share a little bit about ballet, the Black body and ballet. I saw the recent performance that you did and I noticed how emotional you got around talking about acceptance of your body in particular around ballet. I'm wondering about that.

Selma: Yeah, so to give a little context, my school, the drama department, we recently did a virtual production where we talked about a lot of different stuff. We talked about the pandemic, we talked about racism and the Black Lives Matter movement. We really talked over a lot of stuff and highlighted different things that have been going on this year. We wrote every piece ourselves. It was an all-student-led effort, so I'm really proud of everybody for doing that. Shout out to Bishop O'Dowd. At the end of the second day, we did a piece, my friend Zorah Chapelle

and I (shout out to Zorah!), we did a piece on Black girls and ballet. We talked a little bit about how in some spaces earlier-developed bodies are frowned upon, you know. Having larger thighs, (of course, not every Black girl is built the same), sometimes when having larger thighs it doesn't go with the traditional image of what a ballet dancer looks like. Even the fact that pink tights are supposed to match your skin color, I didn't know that. I just thought that people were wearing pink tights. For a long time in my life I just thought, "Okay cool, it's pink tights." I didn't know it was supposed to match your skin color. We talked about how it's really hard sometimes to find tights and clothes in general that match your skin color because when it says "nude" it's the color peach, and I'm like, "My skin isn't peach," you know. The first part of it my friend Zora did a little piece on body image, and then the next footage was actually real footage of us talking on Zoom. I was just talking to some of the teachers in the drama department, talking about why I wanted to do the piece. It was real - we were just talking after rehearsal on Zoom and it was still recording. I had ended up getting emotional on it because I was talking about how sometimes I felt a little bit out of place in ballet class, especially because the last time I was in ballet, since I'm not that advanced in it because I haven't been training long enough, I was in a class with younger girls and they were all much smaller than me, and the majority of them were skinnier. I have the flexibility to do a lot of things, it's just that my legs are heavier so it's harder to hold them up at certain times, and sometimes that would make me feel a little bad, you know. I'm better now, I love my body, but sometimes it would make me feel a little insecure, like, "Wow, I can't do this. I can't do that." That's mainly what we wanted to talk about. Then we ended the piece with doing a dance.

Claudine: A beautiful dance.

Selma: Thank you [laughs].

Claudine: What advice do you have for other girls who might feel similar, or boys?

Selma: For anybody...

Claudine: Or humans!

Selma: Right! Humans in general, don't compare your situation to somebody else's because no two people's situations are going to be exactly the same. Your body is built the way it's supposed to be built because it was built that way. It was built that way for a reason, you know. Your cells developed into that direction because they felt like it. So you're not made wrong, you're made the way you're supposed to be made. Whoever you are, you are that person because you're supposed to be that person. You weren't supposed to be anybody else, so don't compare yourself to anybody else. Yes, it's cool, it's great to look up to people. Role models are like, "Oh cool, I want to dress like this person, they're cool." That's great, but don't ever feel like you have to be somebody else because you're not that person. You are who you are for a reason. If you weren't who you were, then the world wouldn't have *you*, and then that would be boring, so you gotta be who you are or else the world will be boring.

Claudine: [laughs] Yes! Gosh, it's been so great to have you in GIRL Project, and I know it's supposed to be 11 to 14 year olds, and I imagine you'll be coming back and teaching soon in the program.

Selma: Yeah!

Claudine: What do you foresee in the future? What should we be focusing on, either at GIRL Project or the dance field?

Selma: One thing at GIRL Project, honestly GIRL Project is great [laughs]. Or maybe even focusing on more bonding activities, you know, to strengthen the sisterhoods that are made at GIRL Project. I remember we would have some free time when we'd be eating lunch or snacks or different stuff like that, but maybe even putting more games together where people can get to know each other.

Claudine: Hang out time.

Selma: Yeah, hang out time. Or maybe even organizing some stuff, of course after the pandemic [both laugh], organizing some link ups outside of GIRL Project. Maybe taking some trips.

Claudine: We all don't have enough hang out time. Actually, last fall before the pandemic hit we did start doing movie days. We started going to Jack London Square.

Selma: Oh yay!

Claudine: We got ice cream, we went bowling, we played mini golf. Those sorts of just hanging out. Do we really have time to hang out now? I think it's one of the things that we all need to do. How do we chill? I guess we need to chill out. Maybe that's what this is about. What's the lesson here with the pandemic?

Selma: Right.

Claudine: Are we amping up? I kind of feel like I'm amping up and I really need to be going in the opposite direction.

Selma: Yeah, chilling out and taking time for ourselves. [music] This was great, this was fun.

Claudine: Yeah, thank you, Selma.

Selma: Thank you.

Andréa: This has been such a rich discussion, thank you both.

Claudine: Our pleasure.

Selma: You're welcome.

Andréa: This has been such a great experience. We thank you everyone for tuning in for this experimental audio experience. For additional content that reflects our dynamic dance community, please visit our *In Dance* article archive at dancersgroup.org.