

“Knowledge through Mimicry: Si-Lan Chen Leyda’s Complex Identities and Their Consequences”

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Scholarly interest in Si-Lan Chen Leyda, the mixed-race Afro-Chinese choreographer and dancer typically focus on the complexity of her identity as a node linking several diasporas. Born in Trinidad in 1905 to a mulatta plantation heiress whose family originated from Martinique and a Chinese lawyer whose father sought refuge in the then British colony after the Taiping rebellion, Si-Lan Chen grew up in Port of Spain, London, Moscow, and Beijing as her father joined the Chinese nationalist movement abroad under the leadership of Sun Yat-Sen. Beyond the cosmopolitan chicness of her peripatetic life, the most difficult episodes were marked by the arbitrary designations of her citizenship before various national and imperial states. For example, although she carried a British passport and had married the American filmmaker James Leyda in the Soviet Union, the United States government repeatedly refused to grant her permission to live with her husband in New York by invoking the Chinese Exclusion Act. This paper takes the problem of belonging “everywhere and no-where” in a new direction. Consulting Chen’s notebooks, personal letters, interviews, and performances, this presentation highlights Si-Lan Chen as an advocate of the political possibilities of modern dance. Having studied in London and Moscow and assigned to Uzbekistan as a young Soviet cultural ambassador, Si-Lan developed a radical style of modern dance in Beijing rooted in the physical gestures and exertions of workers and peasants. Because she never called any culture or language her “natural” home, Chen relied on mimicry as an

everyday habit. From this life practice, she developed a theory of radical political empathy in which learning and reenacting the movements of others produced more visceral political solidarities.