

CONVERSATIONS ACROSS THE FIELD OF DANCE STUDIES



Dance Under the Shadow of the Nation

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A Word from the Guest Editors

On the Umbra and Penumbra of Nations

Arshiya Sethi and Tani Sebro

Dear Readers,

When Eric Hobsbawm wrote about the rise of nations and nationalism in the 1980s, he envisioned it to be of decreasing significance as globalization continued to undermine the importance of nation-states (1992). Rather than waning in significance, the world has instead seen a “global rise in nationalism” (Bieber 2018, 520). The study of nations and nationalism, and its intersections with politics, economics, and aesthetics, remains a key subject for scholars who take seriously the implications of struggles over power, territory, and cultural practices. Dance studies has long cast light on how nations are reproduced through aesthetic and kinesthetic practices (Reed 2010, Shapiro 2004, McNeill 1997). Today, when nationalism and nationalist resurgences stand center stage in global politics, dance and performance scholars are compelled to examine the complex ways by which the nation impacts movement aesthetics.

For this issue, we specifically challenged our contributors to search for narratives, spaces, and practitioners that could shed light on movement aesthetics in the context of the nation. The diversity of nations and stories that we present in this collection foregrounds how dance and performance become important projects of the nation, controlling memory, history, and populations—by linking geopolitics to the bodies of practitioners.

In our call for essays, we chose two phrases, “the shadow of the nation” and “the umbra and penumbra of the nation” with deliberativeness, as we recognize that nations cast long shadows and act both in the umbra of cartographies and the penumbra of memory and ideas. The long shadow of the nation engenders dangers in how it unevenly confers rights and excludes unwanted subjects while holding a monopoly on violence. Our authors and their interlocutors describe how governments apply varying valences to art forms, marginalizing those deemed less civilized, impure, or scandalous, favoring instead “high” or “classicalized” art forms. Once again, the umbra and the penumbra are important, because when light shines on one art, another finds itself in the shadows.

Idoia Murga Castro demonstrates how an aesthetic repertoire of Spain, forged from the work of Antonia Mercé (1890–1936), aka La Argentina, fused modern and traditional dance forms to erase their origins and critiques of the Spanish Empire. Jingqui Guan interrogates how screen dance performances on Chinese state television are “imbricated in the project of the nation.” Ainsley Hawthorn meanwhile examines the lack of linkages between the nation and belly dance, which even in the nation-building era of secular civic nationalism in Turkey and Egypt—two regions where belly dance is deeply entrenched in popular culture—remains conspicuously unclaimed by national governments.

Arshiya Sethi exposes the previously veiled history of the first Inter-University Youth Festival of India, which remained invisible in the cultural narrative of the new nation, only because it fell outside the cultural complex of the country tasked with promoting aesthetic nationalism. In a more contemporary context, Arushi Singh questions why despite the abundance of dance genres, contemporary dance is marginalized in India, for being ideologically framed as an elite western form, alien to Indian aesthetics. In contrast, Alfdaniels Mabingo highlights how globalization and indigeneity intersect in Uganda, leveraged by the internationally-inclined urban youth population to give Uganda, especially in its capital, a unique metropolitan aesthetic in their version of breakdance.

Rose Martin's work draws from her personal experience of living in Ramallah, amplifying the voices of Palestinian contemporary dancers and the discussion around the maintenance of a Palestinian nation and its dance production during a time of occupation. In her essay, Sarahleigh Castelyn argues that the roots of recent incidents of xenophobia in the South African nation lie in its history of international seclusion due to apartheid. Leaders like Desmond Tutu have cautiously referred to the country as a rainbow nation, a term that acknowledges difference while reinforcing a stabilizing commonality within the spectrum; Castelyn however, recommends the paradigm of creolization, not to erase difference but to highlight more complex connections. Raquel Monroe writes compellingly on the politics of Blackness, in performance, embodiment, and power in the United States and beyond by following, auto-ethnographically, Rihanna's 2016 VMA performance as an embodiment of transnational blackness.

Tani Sebro's essay illuminates the penumbra of the nation through a discussion of the exilic Tai peoples, escapees from violence in Myanmar, who find refuge, sans citizenship, in the performing arts revitalization movement in Thailand. They are an example of how a nation maintains and reproduces itself through performance. One of the essays, about dance as protest against the aggrandizing politics of a nation, nearly didn't happen, because it was being written transnationally, by Venuri Perera in Sri Lanka and Ahalya Satkunarathnam in a diasporic location, when the Sri Lankan nation asserted its power by blocking all international communications. Perera and Satkunarathnam argue that the nation effectively choreographs, even in a setting of explosive violence, its cultural, ethnic and identity politics through movements of both blocking and patronizing dance.

These persistent questions of identity and belonging in an era when the specter of the nation-state governs our everyday and geopolitical existence compel us to contemplate the role of dance and performance in establishing, reinforcing, and at times challenging, the validity, values, and narratives of the nation. We are extremely indebted to our authors for allowing us to engage with their work and to the *Conversations* editorial board for their enthusiasm for the theme and invaluable commentary on the essays that follow.

In solidarity with all those who dance in the umbra and penumbra of the nation,

Tani Sebro and Arshiya Sethi

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Belly Dance, Persona Non Grata of Cultural Dance¹

Ainsley Hawthorn

Solo, improvised, torso-articulated dance, commonly referred to in English as “belly dance,”² is a fundamental part of the dance vernacular of many Middle Eastern and North African cultures, yet is conspicuously unclaimed by national governments. The twentieth century ushered in an era of nation-building in Turkey and Egypt, where belly dance is entrenched in popular culture as both a social and stage dance. Although folkloric dance became a means of constructing and presenting national identity in both countries during this period (Öztürkmen 2001, 2012; Shay 2002), belly dance was excluded from these formulations, reflecting its ambiguous cultural position. A beloved source of entertainment and recreation, belly dance—particularly as performance—has nonetheless been marked as an outsider practice that strains the bounds of social acceptability.

When the Ottoman Empire sided with the Central Powers in the First World War, Britain declared a protectorate over Egypt, an autonomous Ottoman tributary state, and replaced the ruling khedive with a British-backed sultan. Britain granted Egypt nominal independence in 1922, although British occupation persisted until 1952, when a military coup led to the establishment of a republican government. Meanwhile, the Allies’ 1918 occupation of Turkey, the heartland of the Ottoman Empire, sparked the War of Independence, ending in the declaration of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. Although the leaders of these emerging

republics professed a secular civic nationalism, they sought to legitimize their statehood partly by appealing to “a perception of common descent, of shared lineage, of the relatedness of the community” (Baron 2005, 29; also, Xypolia 2016). Both nations promoted an idealised version of the peasant as a symbol of an indigenous cultural identity untouched by outside influences—although this peasant was also a revolutionary in pursuit of national prosperity through modernization (Cefkin 1993, 197; Armbrust 1996, 39).

In these and other newly established or newly independent states, dance played an important role in supporting an ideology of ethnic uniformity at home and presenting a developing national identity abroad. After the formation of the Turkish Republic, the ruling party established a network of *Halkevleri* or “People’s Houses” throughout the country where locals were encouraged to reproduce cultural practices, including folk dance (Cefkin 1993; Öztürkmen 2001, 2012; Shay 2002). By the 1950s, the various regional styles had coalesced into a national repertoire of folkloric dance, homogenized through the imposition of similar floor patterns, music, and costumes.

The establishment of a national folkloric dance troupe in Egypt was initially a private endeavor: inspired by the Soviet Moiseyev Dance Company, Mahmoud and Ali Reda founded the Reda Folkloric Dance

Company in 1959, seven years after the revolution (Shay 2002; Sellers-Young 2016; Vermeyden 2017; Ward 2018). The public's enthusiasm for its early performances caught the government's attention, and, by 1961, the troupe had become a branch of the Ministry of Culture. Choreographer Mahmoud Reda combined Western-style floor patterns and footwork with movements, characters, and images from Egyptian folklife. His objective was not to replicate living folk dance but to produce performances possessing "authenticity of spirit"—qualities that would make his choreographies instantly recognizable to Egyptians (Shay 2002, 146; also Fahmy 1987, 23; Franken 1996, 279; Morocco 2011, 35–36). As with Turkish folkloric dance, the effect was to downplay regional and ethnic distinctions, emphasizing the whole as an emblem of quintessential Egyptianness.

Belly dance is the most widespread form of vernacular dance in Egypt and in Turkey, which might have recommended it as a vehicle for constructing a cohesive national identity in both countries (Cefkin 1993, 43–44; Shay 2002, 141). Consider Ward's observation that "as a shared cultural practice that surpasses the internal divisions of Egyptian society," social belly dance "expresses a unified sense of Egyptian identity in a way that ethnic or region-specific dance forms cannot" (2018, 167). Nevertheless, solo, improvised, torso-articulated dancing is largely absent from the repertoires of Turkish and Egyptian state folkloric dance companies.

The torso-articulated movements in Reda's dances were altered to diminish what he saw as their sexual suggestiveness and embedded within a framework of balletic steps (Fahmy 1987, 68–69; Ward 2018, 176–177). Further, these movements were presented in group choreographies that distinguished Reda's work from solo, improvised belly dancing (Shay 2002, 149). In Turkey, it was decades before the State Folk Dance Ensemble began to incorporate belly dance-inspired routines into its performances in response to the tastes of a growing tourist market (Cefkin 1993, 140; Öztürkmen 2001, 143). These, too, presented sanitized movements in group choreographies (Shay 2002, 209).

Although some have argued that the exclusion of belly dance from repertoires of state companies was a holdover of colonial biases against Middle Eastern genres (Fahmy 1987, 12; Shay 2002, 162), the stigma against professional belly dance in both countries has local roots (And 1976, 140; Fraser 2015, 47; Vermeyden 2017, 28).

Social belly dancing done privately by modestly dressed individuals is generally considered a wholesome expression of joy, but, "if it is done professionally for money with revealing clothes and in a sultry atmosphere, it takes on the meaning familiar in the West, that of eroticism and sexuality" (van Nieuwkerk 1995, 183).

The belly dance entertainer in Egypt and Turkey is three times a sexual radical. First, public display of the body, particularly in motion, has historically been considered immodest. This is a specifically sexual immodesty, not only because the moving body may inspire lust but because visual observation of the body is a form of "symbolic penetration" (Shay 2014, 234–35). Second, because making the body available to public gaze is seen as sexual, accepting pay for this display is regarded as sex work—adjacent (van Nieuwkerk 1995, 45). Finally, professional belly dancing is associated with sexual availability, through promiscuity or prostitution (And 1976, 140; van Nieuwkerk 1995, 182; Shay 2014, 235).

Due to this transgressiveness, professional belly dancers have largely been individuals who are already marginalized by dint of religion, class, or ethnicity. In Ottoman Turkey, solo dance performers were frequently Jewish, Armenian, Greek, or Georgian; today, many are Roma (Shay 2014, 234). In Egypt, most belly dancers have been lower-class Arab Muslim women, Christians, Jews, Nawari (Dom), and, increasingly, foreigners from Eastern Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Brazil (Deagon 2016, 371–72; Walsh 2018). Since the bodies of these dancers are safely distinguished from those of most Turks and Egyptians by their ethnic alterity, they can move "indecently" without upsetting the social order.

Belly dance has also been "Othered" through the use of names that attribute it to foreign cultures: *raqs turkos* "Turkish dance" in Egypt and other Arab countries (Morocco 2011, 103; Kaschl 2003, 87); *raqs misri* "Egyptian dance" in the Arab world outside Egypt (Shay 2002, 141; Kaschl 2003, 87); and *raghs-e arabi* "Arab dance" in Iran (Morocco 2011, 103). In Turkey, belly dance and its accompanying music are called *arabesk* "Arab-style" (Cefkin 1993, 140; also Morocco 2011, 103). While these are not the only names for belly dance, commonly called *raqs baladi* (dance of the countryside) in Egypt for instance, they demonstrate a tendency to question the indigeneity of the dance and to characterize it as at least a transnational, if not wholly foreign, practice.

The sexualization of belly dance performance has led to—and ultimately been exacerbated by—the predominance of women amongst the professional dancers of Egypt and Turkey since the late 1800s. Due to colonial influences precluding men as objects of desire for other men, the number of male belly dancers dwindled (Shay 2014, 210). Female dancers, meanwhile, became emblematic of an unruly and socially destabilizing sexuality (ibid 215; Nooshin 2009, 3).

The establishment of an acceptable womanhood is often a feature of nationalist movements: as Noorani writes, “the moral order of nationality is depicted as the outcome of the process of the negation of desire, which lifts individuals out of the state of egoism and makes them capable of self-sacrifice” (2010, 108; also Stone 2007, 12). The archetypal woman of the Turkish and Egyptian nationalist movements was emancipated, but in service of her social roles as wife and mother, not with a view to sexual expression (Arat 1994, 58; Abu-Lughod 1998, 9). Unlike belly dance, the dances performed by state repertory groups expressed this nationalist ideal by enacting the values of women’s chastity and gender binarism. Dancers’ bodies were fully covered, torso articulations were de-emphasized, and movements were gender-differentiated (van Dobben 2010, 96; Shay 2014, 231).

The omission of belly dance from the repertoires of Egyptian and Turkish folkloric dance companies, then, reflected a broader pattern of disavowing it as a product of the majority culture and suitable representation of the citizenry. The relegation of professional belly dance to minority and foreign performers has facilitated its appropriation by dancers without Middle Eastern heritage (for example, Deagon 2016, 371). A cultural dance without a nation, belly dance has not had the benefit of state sponsorship for its performance, preservation, or dissemination. The lack of official interest in belly dance, however, has safeguarded it against ossification—it remains a living, evolving dance form, deeply embedded in Egyptian and Turkish folklife.

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1. The author would like to thank Sarah Clarke for her valuable assistance in editing this paper.

2. See Hawthorn 2019 for a discussion of the history of the term "belly dance."

Embodying Spanishness: La Argentina and her Ballets Espagnols

Idoia Murga Castro

On the night of December 3, 1931, barely six months after the proclamation of the Second Spanish Republic and the flight of King Alfonso XIII, the president Manuel Azaña awarded the Bow of the Order of Isabella the Catholic to the dancer Antonia Mercé, also known as La Argentina (b. Buenos Aires, 1890, d. Bayonne, 1936). (For a broader look at the biography and work of Antonia Mercé, see Manso 1993, VV. AA. 1990, Bennahum 2008). This was significant for a number of reasons. One, it was the first time that the new regime granted its most esteemed decoration; two, the person recognized was a woman; and three, it was given to a dancer, a profession with less prestige than other artistic fields in Spain at the time. The award honored La Argentina's extensive work as a "cultural ambassador," her role in spreading a modern image of Spain through her Ballets Espagnols dance company, and her performances in international circuits. In the ceremony in which Azaña presented Antonia Mercé with the award, the dancer became the embodiment of a new Spain, bringing together tradition and the avant-garde, the popular and the national, in short, the modern nation that emerged with the Republic. (See photo 1.)

Before receiving that long-awaited recognition in her homeland, La Argentina had been travelling the world for many years performing solo concerts and dancing with her Ballets Espagnols. They were a "Spanish style" version of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, based on



Photo 1: Manuel Azaña awarding the Bow of the Order of Isabella the Catholic to Antonia Mercé, La Argentina. Teatro Español, Madrid, 3 December 1931. Photo: Díaz Casariego. Museo Nacional del Teatro, Almagro.

national imagery and put together with the support of a large group of modern artists and intellectuals (Murga Castro 2017). This initiative responded to critics who had called for the need to curb the excessive deformation of the nineteenth-century *espagnolade* that was seen on the Parisian stage, proposing—as the writer Enrique Estévez Ortega stated—an “indigenous *espagnolade*,” which was defined as a “very Spanish *espagnolade*; that is to say, done by Spaniards, taking advantage of our own art and its extensive folklore” (1928, 188–189). (See photo 2.)

Antonia Mercé’s repertoire deeply marked the reception of Spanish culture abroad, intrinsically linking Spanish stereotypes with her dance, from the bolero school to folklore and flamenco. It was a strategy on which she had been working for some time, as we can see in her text entitled “The Spanish Dance” that Cuban newspapers had published during a tour of the Caribbean island in 1917: “As for me, I have attempted to merge two dances: the Spanish and the so-called ‘modern’ dance. I have eliminated the stridency and acrobatics of Spanish dance and have left its primitive beauty and its special meaning and colour” (Hermida 1917).

This stylization sought to steer clear of clichés: “Avoiding caricature, and refining and defining the essence of Spain, I have presented abroad a Spain that for many educated people, including Spaniards, is ‘more Spain’ than the real Spain” (“La Argentina ...” 1926, 5). Antonia Mercé’s contribution, therefore, focused on several aspects: the combination of a deeply rooted Iberian tradition on a modernized stage; knowledge of academic dance through her family; support of the intelligentsia; continued study of artistic and documentary sources; and the incorporation of other Hispanic folklore into her eclectic repertoire. Nevertheless, her statement regarding her search for something “‘more Spain’ than the real Spain” evinces the construction of a Spanishness based on the perception of the Other (Said 2002). Since the nineteenth century this process had contributed concepts such as charm, passion, voluptuousness and bravery to the stereotype, which, incidentally, was intrinsically linked to the presence and nature of the dance. Moreover, by taking on or accepting these Spanish clichés, which had originally been imposed from the outside, and projecting them internationally, they would be also applied to her benefit (Bhabha 2002). (See photo 3.)



Photo 2: Carlos Sáenz de Tejada, Argentina’s Ballets Espagnols poster, 1927. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. © VEGAP, Madrid 2019.

The definition of Spanishness at that time became a fundamental question. The last colonies had been lost in 1898. Additionally, Spain was in the middle of a serious crisis that did not go unnoticed by intellectuals and artists, who reacted by insisting on the need for national modernization through Europeanization and internationalization. In this sense, Antonia Mercé's programs merged the preservation of traditional heritage and its modernization, and spread it abroad in a national imaginary which, as an "imagined community" (Anderson 1993), defined and consolidated nationalism through its cultural expressions. Her proposal received the support of both experts and the public. The art critic and socialist politician Margarita Nelken considered that her work was the "enthronement, in European refinement, of the deepest purity of our truest essence" (Nelken 1929, 104). Other intellectuals, like the poet Federico García Lorca, while presenting her in New York, referred to how Spain's "national heart" and ancient history had emerged through the body of the women dancers, the current allegory of the "authentic" and traditional common values (1930). The assumption of this narrative by the Second Republic, which was proclaimed the following year, could be interpreted as a political identification of the powerful emotional charge that the performance of these modernized national dances had for popular audiences (Franko 2002, 11).

It is ironic to think of Antonia Mercé as a guardian of the national essences, especially when we consider that her life and professional career took place predominantly abroad. She was born in Buenos Aires, from which she took the artistic name of "La Argentina," died in Bayonne, lived for long periods in Paris and New York, and went on long tours throughout Europe, the Americas, and Asia. The national essences of Spanish dance that Antonia Mercé refers to are based on its supposed ancient origin in Greco-Roman culture and a Hispano-Muslim influence, and she classified it into three groups: Classical, Gypsy—where flamenco was located—and regional (Hermida 1917). The latter are especially relevant when establishing an almost mythical link between the dance and the essence of the nation, a well-exploited resource in the romanticism that legitimized the dancer, dressed in traditional costumes, as a representative of regional diversity that embodied a single "Spanish people." (See photos 4 and 5.)



Photo 3: Antonia Mercé, La Argentina, in *Triana*, with a costume designed by Néstor de la Torre, circa 1929. Unknown photographer. Legado Antonia Mercé, La Argentina, Fundación Juan March, Madrid.



Photo 4: Antonia Mercé, La Argentina, in *El contrabandista*, with a costume designed by Gustavo Bacarisas, circa 1927–1929. Unknown photographer. Legado Antonia Mercé, La Argentina, Fundación Juan March, Madrid.



Photo 5: Antonia Mercé, La Argentina, in *Malagueña*. Photo Mme. D'Ora. Residencia de Estudiantes, Madrid.



Photo 6: Antonia Mercé, La Argentina. Unknown photographer. Archivo General de la Nación, Dpto. Doc. Fotográficos, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

This appropriative process, by which the Spanish dancer would end up creating programs where lengthy ballets were mixed with diverse examples of adaptations of folk dancing from different Spanish towns and regions (for example, *Lagarterana*, *Malagueña*, *Rapsodia vasca*, *Charrada*, *Castilla*, *Valenciana*, *Almería*, *Madrid*) is not trivial. She also incorporated a very interesting aspect into her repertoire based on popular pieces from former Spanish colonies, like *Suite Argentina*, *Cubana*, and *La Cariñosa*, a Philippine dance, which she learned during her tour of Manila in 1929. Moreover, some of these pieces would be included in a larger work entitled *España Tropical*. Here she would stoke the imaginary of the colonial past that had disappeared in 1898 and use it to reclaim a positive Spanish influence in the syncretic heritage that remained in the respective mestizo dance forms. (See photo 6.)

With her mark as both “Spanish” and “Argentinian,” Antonia Mercé underlined an Hispanic heritage with colonial roots that integrated the syncretic dialogue with other forms of “indigenous” or local dance. Moreover, this “otherness” could be applied to the Spanish dance itself, understood as “indigenous” in the sense of “authentic,” as Estévez Ortega stated. Its vernacular value and its peripheral nature, compared to the hegemonic circuits of the canonical academic dance with their center in Paris, made it exotic. It was analogous to that of other companies based on their respective national imaginaries, like the Russian, Swedish or Viennese groups, but different. The objective was the definition of a modern Spanish dance language, based on its own bolero, flamenco, or folkloric idiosyncrasy. It was through the interpretation of those dances, with its “authentic” costumes, that the exoticness became visible to the foreign public as a visual metonymy of “Spain.” Not only was she able to avoid negative connotations during her appropriative processes, the consideration of her work as a cultural policy of Spanishness or *Hispanidad* would lead to the recognition of Antonia Mercé’s contribution as a sort of prestigious diplomatic campaign by the modern state that was engaged in promoting the brand new regime of the Second Republic. It was so successful that it would become a major reference for subsequent Spanish dance companies, even during opposing political periods and tendencies, and continues to be so today.

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Notes

1. The text "El baile español" was reproduced in the article by Francisco Hermida, "Teatro &, &.", published in *La Discusión*, La Habana, on February 20, 1917, and included in album no. 1, p. 91 of the Legacy of Antonia Mercé, *la Argentina*, Fundación Juan March, Madrid. Reproduced in Murga Castro 2017, 406.
2. This research is framed under the R&D&I project entitled *Ballets Espagnols (1927–1929): A Dance Company for the Internationalisation of Modern Art* (P. E. I+D+I Acciones de Dinamización "Europa Excelencia", funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and University – Agencia Estatal de Investigación, ref. ERC2018-092829).

Changing Paradigms: India's Early Aesthetic Nationalism

Arshiya Sethi

Introduction

With very little writing available on the First Inter-University Youth Festival of India (FIUYFI), held in Delhi in 1954, seven years after India's independence, its role in formatting India's aesthetic nationalism has largely been ignored, which is strange, since nations are constructed and reinforced through narratives and narrations (Bhabha 1990, 1). It should have been recognized as a pioneering chapter in the continuous narrative of a modern nation with an ancient civilization that postcolonial India was spinning. This early cultural platform, at the level of the nation, somehow got lost in bureaucratic files, getting tabulated as merely a youth activity, belying the rationality that Max Weber attributed to bureaucracies. This essay, and the research it is based on, which commenced well after six decades since its occurrence, attempts to make visible this key milestone in the arc of India's aesthetic nationalism. (See photo 1.)

Outside the Cultural Complex: Inside a University Setting

Within the first fifteen years of its existence, the Planning Commission, the central institution for integral and integrative planning initiatives in India, created a "cultural complex" (Bennet 2013, 30) at the national level. Apart from managing cultural resources, the cultural complex



Photo 1: Kuldeep Narang (dancer on the right) dancing the folk dance Gidda, at the First Inter-University Youth Festival of India (1954). From the personal collection of Kuldeep Narang



Photo 2: Students of the Panjab University, Ludhiana at the Rashtrapati Bhawan (Presidential Palace), with the President of India in 1954 during the First Inter-University Youth Festival. From the personal collection of Kuldeep Narang who can be seen 2nd from right.

aimed to induce calculated changes by catalyzing postcolonial cultural politics. The list of institutions incorporated in India's centralized cultural complex did not include universities, even though universities did fall then under the overall purview of the Planning Commission. This makes the present case study unique since in this instance, the university system unexpectedly played the role of a cultural crucible.

The FIUYFI, initiated in 1954 by the Minister of Education, Abul Kalam Azad, aimed at harnessing youth energy, attempting to retain the role they had played during the freedom struggle, as stakeholders of the making of the new nation. Despite not having any reference to art in its name, surprising artistic dividends followed this statist intervention, marking the moment when the performative acquired a political

and diplomatic valance, with the Prime Minister himself visiting the venue several times, attending concerts, as he searched for a new generation and a new profile of cultural ambassadors that could enjoy government support and patronage to carry forward its message of 'young nation, old civilisation'.

The FIUYFI participants were described in the official papers as “bona fide students” of Indian Universities. The festival was well attended by participants and young audiences, who fired by the excitement of newly-won independence, the creation of a nation, and the idealism of the freedoms and rights contained in the Constitution of India, would brook no barriers to access the intangible heritage of the country. The pan-Indian spread of participating universities made the festival virtually “a discovery of India” for most of the participants, who admitted that till then they had not really travelled far (Sethi 2015). Most acknowledged in their interviews that they found India at the Festival. (See photo 2.)

Results and Changing Paradigms

University students readily embraced the spectrum of cultural practices on show. Lineage practitioners, the traditional custodians of dance and music who did not have university education, however, began losing not just their cultural practices but also their position and privilege to youngsters, often disciples of stalwarts from their lineage families, who due to their educational status as students of modern university institutions were being categorized as citizens who seemed to represent the nation better. This followed in the steps of the earlier gender-based stigmatization and sidelining of professional women dancers and singers (Srinivasan 1985; Chakraborty 2008). It marked the demographic shift that was only to grow in subsequent years in India.

The spectrum of cultural activities that the Festival offered under the banner of the nation was greater than ever before, because until then all festivals of cultural revivalism and nationalism were built around a limited number of disciplines. The multiple disciplines featured in this festival were arranged along art verticals: drama, elocution, dance, music, radio plays, etc., a format that appeared to be carrying within itself the residue of colonial epistemologies, of India's diversity being arranged—or pigeonholed—into easy to manage boxes, rather than showcasing the integrated artistry that defined the Indian vision of its performance arts. The FIUYFI also established a hierarchy of privilege

within dance, with some dances getting a specific name and classical status, while others were assembled under a generalist rubric of regional folk dances.

If at all the FIUYFI has been remembered in Indian dance history, albeit sporadically, it has been mostly in the context of the first ever performance of a particular dance genre on a national level stage in the national capital of Delhi. The dance performance being referred to was presented in the classical dance section, by the Utkal University student, Priyambada Mohanty. Archaeological and sculptural evidence dating back almost a thousand years testifies to the existence of a “classical” kind of dance in Odisha, but any residue of its practice was almost lost in the colonial period. The sliver that survived had no name then, carrying the generic verb of dance: “nach,” though within two years it would become known as Orissi, later Odissi. The luminaries and gurus who were on the jury of the classical dance vertical of the FIUYFI had certainly not seen it before and were unaware of it, yet what they saw they considered good enough to warrant an award, initiating in the process a curiosity about the origins, repertoire, and history of the dance. As the Indian nation loomed “out of an immemorial past and...glide[d] into a limitless future” (Anderson 2006, 11–12), it kindled a new narrative. Driven by a strong sense of identity pride, the nameless dance form first underwent a naming after the federal region from which it came. Then a program of intense reconstruction ensued, under the aegis of a conglomerate of gurus, scholars, artists and connoisseurs. This conglomerate, established in June 1958, was called Jayantika (Citaristi 2018), and through a conscious act of drawing upon regional riches, in which they all collaboratively participated, they helped build its vocabulary and repertoire. Their efforts were directed towards a greater valorization of the culturally fecund region of Odisha, making it an aspirant to be signified as a marker both of the ancient civilization and the modern nation of India.

It took over a decade and many artistic and legislative interventions driven by regional pride before the dance was officially recognized as classical by the nation. The trajectory of this dance that we know today as Odissi became the prelude to an interesting chapter in Indian dance history, as more and more dances aspired to national recognition as classical. The classical was seen as a way of acculturating citizens to their immemorial heritage, reminding us that the foundation of aesthetic nationalism is both a reconstitution of the past in the present and a projection of the past into the future. (See photo 3.)

was not one of suppressing youthful energy but of canalising it into sports and artistic and cultural activities. He added: "Unless flowers are placed within the reach of youth, they must grasp at the thorns."

Reproduced on this page are photographs of some of the classical dance items presented.

(Please Turn Over.)

Youth Festival In Delhi



Photo 3: Two dancers who participated in the Classical Dance section at the First Inter University Youth Festival covered in the Illustrated Weekly of India. From the personal collection of Tripat Singh, who can be seen on the right.

Conclusion

This is the neglected story of how a youth activity became the runway for India's experiments with the intangible heritage of dance, its cultural economies and aesthetic nationalisms. While some templates of colonial epistemologies continued, it introduced many disruptions of pathways, presumptions and preconceived ideas. Dance and music were repositioned to become reflective of the first flush of the Indian "nation in the making," and presaged democratic access to the learning and practice of the arts. This happened just seven years after

the Indian nation state had formally passed the Devadasi Prevention of Dedication Act in 1947, eliminating the practice, and the right to practice, of traditional professional women dancers. Then, the state had delegitimized dance. Now, with the nation's coming into being as a system of cultural signification with changing paradigms on a new platform for a new agenda and by a new population, dance had not only been legitimized again, but also politicized as an example of aesthetic nationalism.

Notes

1. The term aesthetic nationalism suggests that the aesthetic feeds nationalism and that the arts are supported in proportion to the real or imagined contribution they make to the nation's cultural life. It rejects uniformity at the global level and celebrates differences amongst the community of nations. Any idea of aesthetic nationalism in the Indian context has to account for plurality. Therefore, the slogan of "Unity in Diversity" adopted by the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru was a considered choice.
2. I was aware of the event long years before I interrogated it as a scholar because my mother and two aunts performed in the 1954 Festival. My mother, Tripat Raj Kaur, popularly known as Tripat Singh, now Mrs. Tripat Bawa, danced the classical dance of Kathak from Patna University, while one of my aunts, Kuldeep Narang, now Mrs. Kuldeep Kochhar, from Panjab University, performed the Gidda, a folk dance. My third aunt Priyambada Mohanty, now Dr. Priyambada Mohanty Hejmadi, represented Utkal University in the classical dance segment. More on the 1954 Inter University Youth Festival of India can be found in the special issue of *Nartanam* 15, No.3 (July–September, 2015).
3. The Planning Commission was established on March 15, 1950. Most people assume that its purpose was to ensure planned economic growth, but it saw Art and Culture as integral to the concept of national development.
4. In this work Bennet describes the cultural complex as a range of sites in which distinctive forms of expertise are deployed in "making culture," as a set of resources for acting on society through the different routes and mechanisms constituted by its relations to public spheres, milieus and infrastructures.
5. The youth played a significant role in the anti-colonial movement from the middle of the 19th century. This role had grown in numbers, and intensity as more and more youth icons came to the forefront. When Lord Curzon partitioned Bengal in 1905, for the first time students took part in the freedom movement in large numbers. The young had specifically played a significant role in the Swadeshi, the Boycott, the Non-Cooperation, the Civil Disobedience and the Quit India Movements. The role of the youth was not limited to discussion and debate, as happened in the early years, but later also included the handling of guns and bombs. In this they were inspired by Bhagat Singh and the young Bengal martyrs. Gandhi was a pied piper in response to whose call thousands of young people had come out on the streets in Satyagraha. Most of the young were members of the Congress Party but several others were members of Socialist and other radical parties. Many of the young played pivotal roles overseas as well, especially as members of the Indian National Army, set up by political prisoners in Rangoon and Singapore, during the Second World War.
6. The Prime Minister himself was an agent of change, as from these new representatives of India's artistic traditions on the FIUYFI stage, he handpicked those who went on to serve as modern India's ambassadors of cultural diplomacy and as modern, new and young representatives of age-old traditional Indian performing arts.
7. The festival had participation of 781 students from as many as 26 universities. (<https://dspace.gipe.ac.in/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10973/29330/GIPE-068637.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>); accessed on May 1, 2019.
8. *The Discovery of India* was a book written by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, during his period of incarceration in the Ahmednagar Jail between the years 1942–46, in the period after the Quit India movement. The book, in which Nehru argues that India was an ancient nation with a right to sovereignty, is a travelogue through India's history and philosophy since ancient times.
9. This was the gharana system of Indian dance and music, around which the classical performing arts of India, had been organized for at least seven centuries. It was believed to be the secret behind the seeking of the excellence quotient in the arts. It was a form of social organization that linked musicians or dancers, and the dancer musicians, by lineage or apprenticeship, and by adherence to a particular musical style. The word gharana comes from the root of "griha" or "ghar," which literally means house, and defines a particular close and tightly knit lineage emanating from an iconic figure.

10. In *From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy: A Social History of Music in South India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), scholar Lakshmi Subramanian argues that from the early 20th century, dance and music festivals, independent of religious linkages with temple rituals, began to be organized. These were directed towards a cultural project that helped frame the contours of a national heritage, replete with all its symbolism. These early 20th century festivals that Subramanian refers to were mostly limited to music, and it was only in 1925 that dance was included for the first time. Thereafter some festivals would include dance and music while a majority of them were only music festivals.
11. Priyambada Mohanty Hejmadi subsequently received the National Award for the Arts (Sangeet Natak Akademi award) for her contribution to dance. On the same stage but chronologically after Mohanty, Dharendra Nath Pattanaik presented the same dance in the men's segment. This essay in no way undermines Pattanaik's contribution, but goes by matter of record.
12. Ileana Citaristi's detailed analysis is based on the recently discovered Jayantika papers.
13. The desire to be recognized as classical is based on identity assertiveness, to be the chosen one to reflect the entity of the nation, and above all because of the high level of statist patronage that came the way of the elitist category of classical.

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Uncovering the Limitations of the Indian State's Ideologies of Nationalism and Democracy: The Official Discourse on Modern Indian Dance in the Twentieth Century

Arushi Singh

Introduction

In 1958, cultural officials of the Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) organized the First All-India Dance Seminar to determine the varieties of dance forms prevalent in different regions of India, and to illuminate the practical, theoretical, and historical aspects of these practices. The SNA is India's apex national performing arts body, which was founded by the central government in 1953 so as to take charge of cultivating and supporting music, drama, and dance. SNA's dance seminar is considered an important milestone in Indian dance history because it contains formative deliberations on the reconstruction of Indian dance in the postcolonial scenario, and was carried out by leading scholars and practitioners of the time. Thus, this event contributes to an understanding of the discursive modalities through which aesthetic categories such as "classical," "folk," and "innovative" were constructed by cultural ideologies of the Indian state.

As a product of the time's nationalist philosophy, the seminar overstated the role of classical and folk dance in service of preserving tradition and celebrating regional diversity, respectively.¹ A third stream of creative activity, however, received marginal traction during the event—the field of modern Indian dance. In this essay I address the reasons why the SNA sidelined modern dance during the seminar in relation to the organization's cultural discourse. In the early and mid-twentieth

century, modern dancers like Rabindranath Tagore, Uday Shankar, and Shanti Bardhan incorporated Western and non-Indian Eastern dance techniques into their experiments with multiple Indian classical and non-classical idioms in order to create new dance languages based on secular and open movement vocabularies. Centering a spirit of inquiry, these artists moved away from a blind faith in tradition towards the conscious and critical engagement of dance with contemporary socio-political issues. I evaluate the creative contributions of these modern dancers in juxtaposition to the SNA chairman's opening remarks about the meaning and significance of aesthetic experimentation within the Indian context. In reviewing the contradicting commentaries of the SNA chairman and the modern dance representatives about the creation of new forms during the seminar, I argue that the treatment of modern dance reveals the limits of the Indian state's dictum of nationalism and democracy, especially its ideas regarding the character of Indian identity and ideal citizenship.

State Definition of Aesthetic Experimentation

Throughout the seminar, the inaugural speech by P.V. Rajamannar is the only time a state representative discussed the subject of creating new forms of dance. As the first chairman of the SNA, Rajamannar's commentary offers a critical perspective on how cultural actors of

the Indian state received experimentation in dance during the mid-twentieth century. Towards the end of his address, Rajamannar queries and answers his own question about dance innovations:

Apart from the preservation of old traditions, is there no scope for the creation of new forms? I would answer 'Yes', provided the inspiration is genuine and the creation is authentic and original and not mere imitation, as for instance some of the rock'n'roll dance sequences we see in modern Indian films" (Rajamannar [1958] 2013, 10).

In order to interpret Rajamannar's definition of creative forms, I focus on what is implied by his use of the words "authenticity" and "originality." Firstly, his statement needs to be understood in light of the importance that Indian nationalists placed on cultural revivalism in the twentieth century. Revivalism was an anti-colonial movement adopted by the Indian intellectual elite in the early 1930s, who in order to salvage the subcontinent's national heritage, reconstructed and selected classical dance as a representation of the finest in Indian tradition. Their claim to tradition appeared as a crucial means of legitimizing classical dance as "authentic," "pure," and related to "mythic, divine and ancient origins" unscathed by colonial forces (Chakravorty 2008, Purkayastha 2014, and Sarkar 2008). In this regard, I analyze Rajamannar's use of the term "authentic" as a cipher for classical dance, such that within the discourse of the state, the creation of new forms was only legitimate when it operated within and enhanced the framework of tradition and by association, assisted the consolidation of national identity.

Secondly, Rajamannar's remark about dances in modern Indian films gives us further clues about the kind of aesthetic experiments considered legible by the Indian state. He charges film dances with ventriloquism, of finding a voice through signifiers of American dance such as rock'n'roll. Dances in modern Indian films during this time period were strikingly hybrid and unceasingly celebrated aesthetic syncretism by openly borrowing from and re-appropriating global movement idioms.² By qualifying film dance as an imitation, Rajamannar seems to ideologically frame it as a "Western" or "foreign" category, "alien" to Indian sensibilities in character, rather than accepting it as an "original" local practice oriented to world culture. Rajamannar's definition of aesthetic experiments reveals that the state's definition of Indian identity was characterized by prescriptive boundaries of nation and culture. The model of cross-cultural creativity forwarded by film dances

threatened the ideals of cultural purity propagated by the Indian state, and thus were viewed with deep skepticism by its cultural agents such as Rajamannar.

Politics of Modern Indian Dance

The Indian state's definition of aesthetic experimentation provides a larger discursive framework to understand the status of modern Indian dance. During the seminar, modern dance is recognized through the category of "ballet." The term "ballet" has Western connotations, and as scholars of modern Indian dance have already observed, practitioners of this form were commonly viewed as performing "Western" dance or intermixing Western and Indian dance to create "fusions," a term which had associated meanings of impure and inauthentic (Purkayastha 2014, Sarkar 2008). Due to its intercultural incorporations, modern dance was thus dealt with in the same fashion as film dances by the Indian state, and this explains one of the reasons for its marginal status at the event.³

Notwithstanding, the papers presented by representatives of modern dance at the seminar emphasized the politics underlying the hybridity of the form. For instance, Shrimati Tagore, an illustrious dancer and pupil of Rabindranath Tagore, suggests that although her teacher was inspired by traditional art forms, he charted new aesthetic directions in his dance-dramas by borrowing from regional, national and international movement idioms during the colonial period. Tagore's ideas on interculturalism were based on his critiques of the Empire and parochial nationalism (Purkayastha 2014). Similarly, Uday Shankar's student and choreographer, Sachin Shankar, discusses how his mentor used a non-codified vocabulary to be conversant with problems of modern Indian society as illustrated in his groundbreaking dance film *Kalpna* (1948), which closely considers issues of labor and corporate ownership at a time when the newly founded republic of India was negotiating its relationship to the emergence of capitalism. Moreover, Shanti Bardhan's artistic and life partner, Gul Bardhan, explains how her husband's dance choreographies for Indian People's Theatre Association ran parallel to the nationalist reconstruction of Indian classical dance. In terms of structure and thematics, Bardhan's ensemble productions in the 1940s reflected connections to an international communist philosophy, and his choreographies such as *Bhooka Hai Bengal* (1944), forwarded cultural critiques of colonialism, fascism and capitalism (Purkayastha 2014).⁴

Dance scholar, Prarthana Purkayastha (2014) notes that modern choreographers, in an attempt to engage with social realism in their works, had willingly chosen to employ hybrid aesthetics in their creative productions. In extending Purkayastha's claim, I argue that modern dance's critical stance is the second reason for its nebulous position within the political framework of the Indian state since 1947, especially around the notion of ideal citizenship. According to political theorist Srirupa Roy, the ideal citizen of postcolonial India, in marked contrast to the liberal-democratic norm of autonomous citizen, was defined in terms of dependencies upon and the abilities to produce for the nation (2007, 20).⁵ In emphasizing individual creativity and freedom and critically engaging with the idea of the "nation," Indian modern dancers thus challenged the state's definition of a citizen's duty.

Conclusion

In the twentieth century, institutions of the Indian state such as the Sangeet Natak Akademi encouraged classical dances which were invested in reviving a pre-colonial, "pure" past and preserving the past glories of India, without contemplating the violence of colonialism that triggered the careful construction of these forms in the first place. In contrast, cultural experiments like modern dance, which engendered a hybrid language and engaged social critique as a way to reflect and draw from the aesthetic and political implications of colonialism, were seen as corrupt, messy and foreign. Moreover, while the postcolonial state celebrated its democratic constitution during events such as the dance seminar, the modalities and manifestations of democratic practice, like forms and expressions of social conflict embodied by modern dance, were singled out and marginalized in the public and cultural life of India (Roy 2007).⁶ In this sense, examining the dance seminar's approach to aesthetic experiments such as modern dance discloses the limits within the Indian state's discourse of nationalism and democracy.

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Notes

1. As demonstrated by South Asian dance literature, nineteenth- and early twentieth century aestheticians, scholars and national elites associated with devising the history of Indian dance, legitimized Indian classical dance by embedding it within the framework of ancient theories of aesthetics and performance such as the second century AD dramaturgical treatise, *Natyasastra*, and re-constructed it for the revival of an authentic Indian past representing India's national identity. Additionally, since its establishment as a sovereign nation-state in 1947, India has been rendered in terms of its intrinsic and inalienable diversity. By drawing folk dances into the representational framework of the state during events such as the seminar, the Sangeet Natak Akademi was able to justify and perpetuate a pluralistic imagination of India.
2. Since the first Indian talkies in 1931, the artistic influences of film dances ranged from regional performance traditions such as *nautanki*, *jatra*, Parsi theatre (which is in itself a fusion of Indian folk idioms and European theatre techniques), classical Sanskrit aesthetics to Western movement vocabularies with overt influences of waltz, rumba, samba, jive, rock'n'roll, shake, twist and cha-cha-cha beginning to appear in cinema of the 1950s and 60s (Subramaniam 2003, 133, 136).

3. Prarthana Purkayastha claims that Indian national builders and cultural policy-makers were implicated in the delayed recognition of Indian modern dance, along with their Western cultural counterparts. While modern dance in North America initially drew within its aesthetic sphere and then later discounted Asian dance practices, the Indian nationalist desire to find an “authentic” pre-colonial past aligned with Orientalists and distanced itself from the experience of modernity and transnationalism (2014, 4).
4. Shanti Bardhan was conversant with international communist philosophy of the early twentieth century to create cultural productions such as *Bhooka Hai Bengal* for Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA). IPTA was a nation-wide cultural movement organized by the Communist Party of India in 1943, to unite the fragmented left-wing across the subcontinent. IPTA’s aim was to rediscover and revive “grassroots” performing art forms, by associating them with contemporary socio-political events and making them accessible for the masses in rural and urban contexts. The cultural sphere of IPTA was marked by a movement away from bourgeois models of theatre and performance towards an alignment with indigenous folk models of theatre, music, and dance. The productions choreographed by Shanti Bardhan during his time as the director of IPTA’s dance squad had remarkable similarities with the arts practice of the pre- and post-Bolshevik revolutionary era, which were characterized by a spirit of collectivism and the politics of agitprop theatre. Soviet *drambelts*, which enabled the working classes to practice art forms, was undoubtedly an inspiration for IPTA’s cultural engagements, and also influenced Bardhan’s choreographic vision (Purkayastha 2014, 82–85).
5. According to performance scholar Anita Cherian, during the early years of nation-state formation, culture was framed as an “imagined foundation of social solidarity,” which would contribute to the economic rehabilitation of the subcontinent after 200 years of colonial rule (2009, 34). Cherian studies how policymakers in India defined the role of cultural activities in the first three Five-Year Plans of national development. She observes that while in the First Plan (1951–56), culture was concealed under the guise of education, and the Second Plan (1956 to 1960–61) created provisions for the institutionalization of culture, but both schemes emphasized the role of culture in shaping a disciplined national citizenry, who would be “invested not in an ethic of self-interest, but a larger mission of ‘rapid and coordinated advance’ towards the ‘economic development of an underdeveloped country’” (36–37). Such a framing of culture has direct implications for the ways in which cultural institutions of the state such as the Sangeet Natak Akademi viewed the function of performing arts in the first decade of its establishment.
6. My claim expands on Srirupa Roy’s political analysis of the postcolonial Indian state. In the introduction to her book, *Beyond Belief: India and Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism*, Roy observes that the idealization of apolitical behavior was a pervasive refrain amongst state elites and social movement activists alike, who expressed a common dislike “for the corrupting, petty, messy, and otherwise ‘profane’ nature of political action” (2007, 20).

“Urban Meets Traditional:” Constructing Metropolitan Dance Aesthetics in Kampala City

Alfdaniels Mabingo

Introduction

The rapid urbanization of Africa fuels emerging urban youth cultures with both global and local influences. With new communication technology facilitating exchanges of ideas, urban youths¹ engage in diverse artistic and cultural experiences to frame performative practices, visions and imaginaries and reconstruct the local and global sensibilities (Appert 2016, Ntarangwi 2004). This essay critically examines how the youth in Kampala, Uganda’s capital city, embody the idea of “urban meets traditional”² to (re)construct a metropolitan aesthetic and synthesis that contends with, complicates, and circumvents the notions of a “nation.”

The analysis draws on the interview reflections of eight female and male youths, my observation insights, and the theory of “third space” (Bhabha 2004, 55–56) to reveal how “urban meets traditional” situates the bodies of youths in metropolitanism as a locally grounded and globally articulating space (Appert 2016). Third space connotes experiences, identities and products between more than one cultural source and it “provide[s] the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (Bhabha 1994, 1). (See photo 1.)

Breakdance and Self-Guided Experimentation in Kampala

To examine how the youths have leveraged breakdance and indigenous dances to create a metropolitan dance aesthetic, it is important to interrogate the ways in which they have honed their breakdance proficiency in the urban environment. This is more so since the “youth in Africa are already part of Africa’s global processes and changes that have shaped their daily lives and that these are best understood through an analysis of hip-hop” (Ntarangwi 2010, 1318).

Advancements in communication and information technology have enabled the youth in Africa to access hip-hop dance culture – MC-ing, beat-boxing, DJ-ing, breakdancing, and graffiti art, mostly from the US, but also from Europe (Ntarangwi 2004). Originally, this interface occurred through VHS recordings, but most recently online platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Vimeo, WhatsApp, and Tik Tok, among others have accelerated accessibility of hip-hop culture. Abramz Tekya, the founder of Breakdance Project Uganda (BPU), mentioned, “As a child, I watched many dance videos on VHS and movies like *Breakdance*, *Beat Street*, and *Flashdance*. I was so captivated by the technique of breakdance, especially how the dancers moved their body parts: the spins, freezes, and movements.” The recordings spurred Tekya’s quest to look beyond the local milieu to develop creative imaginations and pursue kinesthetic aspirations in breakdance.



Photo 1: Youth participants exploring Runyege dance of the Banyoro people of Western Uganda during Equation event at Uganda National Cultural Center in Kampala.

The youths I interviewed observed that living in the suburban environments deepened their attachment to, identification with, and interest in breakdance. Embodying the dance form engrained a sense of metropolitan character. Caroline Mose has noted that “As an urban cultural expression, hip-hop and the city are therefore copulatory, and hip-hop expression is itself a representation³ of the urban space” (2013, 106). Antonio Ssebuuma, one of the pioneers of breakdance in Uganda, states, “Every time I watched breakdance movements on TV such as baby freeze, chair freeze, baby swipe, handstand, and toprock among others, I would go out and try it in the compound or spaces on the streets.” Constrained by lack of well-resourced dance spaces, the youths such as Ssebuuma embark on embodied experimentations in their “hoods” to (re)interpret and deconstruct breakdance.

The adaptation of breakdance to alternative spaces exemplifies empowerment, accessibility, and freedom, which the hip-hop dance cultures render to the less privileged communities. Adaptability to unconventional spaces democratizes embodied explorations and kinesthetic imaginations. Consequently, the youths have agency in creating an aesthetic that carries inimitable identity, which is neither national nor global and local.

Through breakdance, the youths have been able to mobilize individual talents into communities of urban street dance practice such as Breakdance Project Uganda (BPU) and Tabu Flo, among others. According to Abramz Tekya, “BPU offers suburban youths opportunities to develop their dance talents, move away from crime, and use their

movement expressions to raise social and political issues prevailing in local communities.” These creative and performative interconnections empower the youths to negotiate and embody social and political issues affecting their communities.

The community-oriented breakdance practices coalesce the youths into collective street urban identities. Drichiru Key, one of the female pioneers of breakdance, observed, “Every time we did the cypher⁴ at BPU, different people shared different movements. The cyphers became a community of learning, sharing and growing.” The youths share embodied expressions as they navigate aesthetic performativities and form creative identities that are ontologically different from the indigenous and the global.

‘Urban Meets Traditional’: Constructing Metropolitan Dance Aesthetic

As the metropolitan aesthetic continues to take shape, the youths’ desire to ground their practices in indigenous artistic and cultural sensibilities also grows. The idea of “urban meets traditional” is pursued as an organizing framework for dialogue on, deconstruction and conceptualization of these new creative and cultural imaginaries. Abdul Muyingo, one of the pioneers of breakdance and founder of the Tabu Flo and Equation events, told me, “When I went to the UK to attend the dance festival called Funkness Styles, I competed under a style called hip-hop. I did not go through. An adjudicator told me, ‘bro, your style was not hip-hop. Your style is unique. I cannot place it anywhere.’” Muyingo’s encounter reveals the dilemmas that the youth confront as they attempt to create an aesthetic that is personal and intercultural in metropolitan spaces.

Reflecting on the adjudicator’s comment, Muyingo realized the crisis of artistic identity experienced by youth in Kampala: “When the judge said ‘I cannot place it anywhere,’ I realized that as urban youths, we needed to expand our knowledge of indigenous dances⁵... and create something that identifies us. I created the event called Equation, which is based on the philosophy of “urban meets traditional” to achieve this goal.” “Urban meets traditional” seeks to create pathways for the youth to construct artistic performativities that aggregate from both the indigenous dance forms and breakdance techniques.

“Urban meets traditional” offers a framework for melding the indigenous dance ideas with the ever-evolving breakdance adaptabilities. The bodies of the youths become constellations where new movement and rhythmic idioms are activated and configured. The indigenous dances immerse the youth into cultural knowledge as dancers. Lillian Nabaggala, mentioned, “Indigenous dances form our roots. Because dances such as hip-hop are new..., integrating them with indigenous dances enables us to create a new movement voice that borrows from the global and local dance ideas and at the same time acknowledges the ethos of urban settings.”

Embodying “urban meets traditional,” youths freely employ their creative ingenuity to make their imaginaries aesthetically explicit. According to Abramz Tekya, “Whenever I perform breakdance, there are drops that come from Mwaga, Isonja and Inemba dances of the Bagisu people of Eastern Uganda, which I use for transitions. I also use many shoulder movements from Larakaraka dance of Acholi people of Northern Uganda because they are suitable for top rock.” In one of the Equation events that I observed, about 30 youth learned the Maggunju dance movements, songs and drum rhythms of the Baganda people of Uganda from a master dance teacher. A dialogue on how the youths could fuse drum rhythms, movements, stories, and songs with breakdance techniques followed this activity. As individuals and in groups, the youth then fused movements of the Maggunju dance with breakdance techniques such as boyoing, power step, Latin rock, shuffle, swapping and body glide, to create freestyle hybrid dance pieces that they showcased in a cypher. (See photo 2.)

Equation acts as a site where the youths engage in processes of cultural (re)production. The byproduct of this creative (re)imagination and embodied exploration stems from breakdance as a foreign tradition and indigenous dances as local cultural practices. The dominant position of breakdance in “urban meets traditional” reflects mimetic tendencies, which emerge from how breakdancing builds the youths’ “capacity to identify oneself or establish similarities with something else while at the same time inventing something original” (Mbembe 2004, 376). The youth aggregate breakdance styles from the dominant Western capitalistic cultures and use it to form a fundamental skill set into which the indigenous dance techniques are blended. In this context, the “youth culture trains its gaze outwards from the local to the global in order to look back into the local” (Wa Mungai 2007, 48 cited



Photo 2: Youth participants taking a class in Mwaga dance of the Bagisu people of Eastern Uganda during Equation event at Uganda National Cultural Center in Kampala.

in Mose 2013, 115). The aesthetic that is constructed is sited in the ecologies of the metropolis and its appeal cannot be read as reflective of national identity and character. (See photo 3.)

“Urban meets tradition” (re)constructs kinesthetic idioms that are convoluted by the global inclinations and indigenous connections. These idioms form a third space (Bhabha 1994), which frames the body as a purveyor of metropolitan spatiality and sensibilities that are neither national nor global and indigenous. According to Abdul Muyingo, “The youth are caught up in-between. It is like should we do this urban movement style or indigenous dances? We are confused. Given the urban environment, we cannot have a very deep insight of the indigenous dances. We are caught up in between.” Navigating “urban

meets traditional” is complex. The youths continue to grapple with maneuvering the delicate space between breakdance as an adapted foreign form and indigenous dances as appropriated cultural practices.

Conclusion

An enmeshment of indigenous dance and breakdance adaptabilities within the metropolis spatial boundaries, “urban meets traditional” renders the youthful bodies to currents of thought and embodied constructions of a unique creative, temporal, and cultural aesthetic. This aesthetic contends with, complicates and circumvents the idea of a nation, as it is (re)constructed with complexities of indigenous dance forms and intricacies of breakdance within the locus and imaginaries of the metropolis.



Photo 3: Antonio Bukhar Ssebuuma leading an Afro-fusion class during the Equation event

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Notes

1. The participants in this inquiry included three female and five male youths aged 19–30 years, who have practiced urban street dance styles in varied communities for more than 10 years.
2. Urban meets traditional is an idea that the urban youths use during the monthly event dubbed “Equation.” Every last Saturday of the month, the youths of varied skill levels learn an indigenous dance from a local dance teacher, after which they creatively fuse indigenous dance movements, songs, stories, and drum rhythms with urban street dance styles such as breaking, krumping, hip-hop/freestyle, style yake, dancehall, and Afrohouse to create hybrid dance routines. Equation is hosted at the Uganda National Cultural Centre in Kampala. (See also <https://www.bataloeast.org/project/the-equation-jams/>).
3. The ways hip-hop renders itself to the distinct spatial, aesthetic, and cultural impulses of the African cities in which it is adapted.
4. A cyclic formation where participants in the circle take turns to share freestyle hip-hop dance techniques.
5. Some of the indigenous dances that have been covered during Equation events include Maggunju, Bwola, Otole, Kizino, Kitaguriro, Mwaga, Larakaraka, Gaze, Runyege, Mbagga, Naleyo, Baakisimba, Imbalu, among others. For the cultural functions that each dance serves in its culture of origin, see Asiimwe, Agnes any Grace, Flavia Ibanda. 2008. *Dances of Uganda*. Kampala: Tou Guide Publications.

Sustaining, Shifting, and Shaping a Nation One Step at a Time: Dance Practices in Ramallah, Palestine, as a Location for Reimagining National Identity

Rose Martin

With years of ongoing conflict in Palestine, the contemporary dance practices occurring there are woven with questions of political, social, and cultural identity (Kaschl 2003; Martin 2016; Rowe 2010, 2011). Contemporary Palestinian dance that is performed at political rallies attends to issues of travel restrictions and checkpoints, and dancers themselves are limited in where they can travel in their own country to take a dance class or attend a performance due to occupation or blockade.

This essay draws on short narratives from three contemporary dance practitioners—Leila, Nadia, and Noora—who are situated in Ramallah, Palestine. I gather narratives purposefully in my research, with narratives being viewed as an investigation of the multiple ways people experience the world (Kim 2015; Warhol and Lanser 2015; Zingaro 2017). I see that narratives offer a medium to understand the complexity of the human experience, and through stories there is the potential for reflection and a teasing out of meanings (Kim 2015). In the context of doing research about dance in Palestine, narratives evoke moments in time that give understanding to an individual's encounter with the world that tends to be underrepresented within current dance scholarship (Martin 2013).

I met Noora, Leila and Nadia numerous times between 2009 and 2014. Ethical approval from my institution was granted to conduct the interviews, and all three dancers chose to be identified in the

research. I had lengthy conversations with each of them about this, and they were each adamant that they wanted to have their names and identifiable details attributed to their words.

I interviewed Noora, Leila and Nadia, and others, when I was based in Ramallah, teaching and engaging in research projects. These projects, including the fieldwork for my PhD (Martin 2012) and research for two books (Martin 2016; Rowe, Buck and Martin 2014) allowed me time to build relationships with those in the dance community. To offer a brief context: Ramallah is the main administrative center for the Palestinian Authority (PA) and a hub for the international aid industry in Palestine. In Ramallah there are large-scale construction projects, upmarket hotels and nightclubs, and cafes selling coffee with prices on par with London, all of which tends to be jarringly at odds with prevailing notions of Palestinian life under the shadow of Israeli occupation. (See photo.)

Dance, of many varieties, has been part of the fabric of Ramallah for a long time, with groups such as El-Funoun Palestinian Popular Dance Troupe and Sareyyet Ramallah Dance Company offering a long lineage of dance training in dabke and Western contemporary dance practices, along with performances and festivals (Martin 2016; Rowe 2009, 2010). The three dancers identify themselves as contemporary practitioners, teaching, performing and making dance. It can be understood that the term “contemporary dance” “is fraught and contended across various



"Dancer, Nadia Khattab, Ramallah". Photography by ASH

dance genres” (Kwan 2017, 39). In this essay the term “contemporary” is used in relation to dance practices that are considered “new” or “innovative” in the context in which they are presented (Rowe 2009); these practices may or may not draw on techniques and ideas located within Western contemporary dance. The three dancers have a variety of dance experiences in Palestine and abroad, and work across a range of contemporary dance languages and approaches, while also drawing on folkloric dabke dance practices.

The dancers’ narratives reveal that what it means to be “Palestinian” is diverse, and that there is a desire to express this diversity through dance. Noora, a dancer, teacher and choreographer, explained:

The word “identity” for me is tricky because it can trap you in one place or another. I think I carry my history and identity in my flesh and blood, and this is not the same as the next person. Who I am is not fixed to a single location and it also doesn’t go away when I’m in a different location. I don’t need to tell people “I am Palestinian.” My work reflects who I am and my reality, and it will probably carry something political or social because this is who I am, not just because I am “Palestinian.”

The idea of “carrying something political or social” mentioned by Noora is something that can be seen within her choreographic practice. Noora’s choreography has explored notions of occupation and territory, collective identity and societal expectations.

The experiences of these three dancers also illuminate that there have been conscious shifts away from engaging in dance that seeks to preserve an imagined Palestinian identity. Rather, there is a desire to question these identities and to share a contemporary identity that attends to nationhood in a more ambiguous way. Leila, a dancer, choreographer, and teacher, said:

When I first started dancing as a child during the Second Intifada, it was all about resistance, telling the story of Palestine, things like that. I am not so concerned about holding on to the past and preserving movements; I’d rather think in a creative way and try new movements. I mean, I still probably carry some of the “traditional” ideas in the dances I do, but I am not afraid of letting these go, loosening what I am trying to share about Palestinian dance and who I, or we [as Palestinians] are today.

Leila’s ideas can be seen within the movement vocabulary she offers. Often Leila’s choreographic practice leans on the folkloric dance practice of dabke, however rather than keeping the lower torso (waist, hips, pelvis) still in her movement (as per the more “traditional” practice), Leila includes this part of the body, allowing the movements to be circular, generous, and with a lower center of gravity.

Nadia, a dancer and choreographer, also shared insights related to her choreographic work. Nadia said:

In the work I make, Palestine is there but it is more about the life we live today. Maybe I want to make a work about when a person has no ID, how does that make them feel? How does that impact on them? Obviously, in a Palestinian context, no ID here is something we deal with. I’m choosing it as an idea to explore in my work not to make a major political statement, but because it is the world we live in.

Nadia choreographed a duet that explored the issue of ID in the Palestinian context. The duet, between herself and a fellow dancer has a tension that played out in movements of pushing and pulling, a frustration that emerged through repetitive gestural movements and sounds—wringing of hands, clicking of fingers, and slapping each other’s faces.

The three short vignettes shared by Leila, Nadia and Noora, shows that in dance there is the potential for a layered interpretation regarding nationhood, with a variety of symbolisms in the movement and artistry. From listening to the experiences of dancers in Ramallah, it is clear that there is the view that social and cultural resistance can lie in dance. However, it also appears that the dancers are conscious that there is the potential to fall into a trap of “offering essentialist representations of group identity” (Rancière 2009, 17). For example, Nadia notes how she might draw on current issues within the society she lives in. While these issues might be political, Nadia shares that the desire to present them within her work is more closely related to the idea that they are part of the life she and those around her live, rather than as a purposeful political statement.

Leila notes how she recalls dance experiences as a child, during the Second Intifada (2000–2005), which were focused on the ideas of resistance. These changes in the terrain of Palestinian dance can be

observed clearly within recent times. As Leila goes on to explain how she is “not so concerned about holding on to the past and preserving movements,” perhaps indicating that there are new spaces opening up within Palestinian contemporary dance that are broad, individualized, and with scope for various possibilities.

An awareness of identity in relation to “being Palestinian” was raised in many ways by Leila, Nadia and Noora. However, Noora’s view that she does not see her identity as something fixed to a certain location and the statement “I don’t need to tell people ‘I am Palestinian’” highlights that there is perhaps a shift away from grounding identity in the nation state towards understanding identity to be an amorphous idea, as individuals inevitably find themselves with multiple complex facets to their identities. A sense of an imagined and socially constructed union through a nation suggests that no nation is inherent or innate, and that any nation is vulnerable to shifts and changes to any shared culture and social cohesion that sustains it.

In a time where it could be said that nationalism is on the rise globally (Postelnicescu 2016), the perspectives shared by Leila, Nadia, and Noora reveal that these three dancers in Ramallah, Palestine, are not necessarily following this discourse despite the nationalistic narratives that have been developed through Palestinian art over the years (Nicholson 2017). Rather, diversity and individuality are topics of interest, attending to the realities of life now in Ramallah, not the life of years gone by.

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We All are Makwerekwere: Xenophobia, Nationality, Dance and South Africa

Sarahleigh Castelyn

It's 1998 in Durban, South Africa and I'm in a minibus taxi heading for the university where I'm both teaching and studying dance. Kwaito superstars Boom Shaka's "KwereKwere" is playing loud on the speakers, making the windows shake. Kwaito draws on South African music genres such as Maskanda, with influences from artists such as Brenda Fassie (our Madonna of the townships), British and American dance, and hip-hop music, and is sung in the township vernaculars of Tsotsitaal and Iscamtho. The song's title is South African slang for African nationalities living in South Africa and has onomatopoeic roots replicating how Black South Africans would describe African languages spoken by their fellow Africans. Post-apartheid South Africa has seen the rise of horrific violent xenophobic attacks by a minority of Black South Africans on African nationalities such as Nigerians, Somalis, and Zimbabweans. Two decades later, the term *Makwerekwere* is used in a derogatory manner to refer to African migrants. When analyzing the rise of xenophobia in South Africa, it is important to recognize how apartheid has left a legacy—a memory—of "the other" that manifests in xenophobia. As Bronwyn Harris, former Project Manager at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation states, South Africans have been disciplined to hold "a *dislike*, a *fear*, or a *hatred*" of the other (Harris 2002, 170).

During the apartheid era isolation was not only external from the outside world due to sanctions and restrictions on international travel, but also internal as South African society underwent an internal isolation as

people were racially segregated. The Population Registration Act of 1950 forcibly defined race based on "appearance and lifestyle" and not descent (Posel 2001, 102). In post-apartheid South Africa, government, sports, and media organizations promote a "new South African" national identity in an attempt to unite a previously segregated society. Literary scholars Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael suggest that "[e]mergent alongside a new-nation discourse, The Foreigner stands at a site where identity, racism and violent practice are reproduced" (Harris 2002, 169). Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of imagining communities as nations offers an awareness of the flaws within imagined communities as this seduction creates notions of belonging and not belonging, which can result in divisive, jingoistic, and even violent performances of nationality. Feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young (2005, 150) rightly warns that it is dangerous to "romanticiz[e] 'homeland'" as this imagining of community can create "rigid distinctions between 'us' and 'them.'" This imagined community of the "new" South Africa and its distinction between an "us" and "them" has contributed to the rise of xenophobia. In a news report on the anti-xenophobia Peace March held in Durban in 2015, a protestor held a placard with the word "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabany*" on it. This refers to *Ubuntu*, an isiZulu term that is also a way of being: "a person depends on others to be a person" (Teffo 1996, 101). It appears on the protestor's placard to remind South Africans that we are dependent on each other, and



Flatfoot Dance Company's *Homeland (Security)* (2016). Choreographed by Lliane Loots. Performed at The Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre, Durban, South Africa, April 6–10, 2016. Photographed by Val Adamson. Dancers, from left to right: Sanele Maphumulo, Zinhle Nzama, Sifiso Khumalo, Kim McCusker, Tshediso Kabulu and Jabu Siphika.

we have kinship with other nations: we must resist the boundaries of “us” and “them.” Through the mobilization of bodies marching against xenophobia, we see *Ubuntu* in play.

A contemporary dance work that explores *Ubuntu* is Flatfoot Dance Company's trilogy *Homeland* (2016) in which choreographer Lliane Loots responded to the xenophobic attacks in Durban where the dance company is based. Arts journalist Caroline Smart writes that the first part, *Homeland (Security)*, sees “Loots and the dancers respond to [the] false notion of belonging to a nation state” (Smart 2016). There are strong choreographed moments in *Homeland (Security)* in which reference is made to the often-fraught journeys that migrants make, with many of them forced to leave their homes due to violence. At one point, three of the dancers stand close together side-by-side

suggesting perhaps a security fence, the type that is used to define the border between South Africa and its neighbors. Another dancer walks up behind this wall of bodies. Through the use of choreography, the division of “us” and “them” is physically broken as these three dancers turn to face the lone dancer and move to gently lift the dancer over their heads and place the dancer with care in front of where they are standing. This is an example of *Ubuntu*, as for this choreographed movement to be successfully executed, all four dancers have to work together; they are dependent on each other. (See photo.)

Contemporary dance in South Africa draws on a variety of dance forms including contact improvisation, Graham-based technique, Hawkins technique, Release technique, ballet, popular dance forms such as isiPantsula and Gumboot, ballroom dancing, Kathak, Bharatanatyam,

traditional South African dance languages like Ngoma, and everyday movement. Nuttall and Michael suggest a creolized space as a framework for thinking about South African culture so as not to erase difference but to highlight the “complex process of making connections” (Nuttall and Michael 2000, 6). Contemporary dance in South Africa embodies creolization in both its form and its practice, and this is extremely evident in the second part of the trilogy, *Migrations at the Feet of Kali* (2016), in which a creolization of Kathak, contemporary dance, and hip-hop is used to explore “intersecting histories of Indian indentured laborers, Black migrant workers and White privilege” (Craighead 2017). It is important to stress here that according to arts journalist Adrienne Sichel the origins of “South African contemporary dance has been, to a large extent, a political act of defiance and activism” (Sichel 2012, 108). It makes use of what Ann Cooper Albright terms a responsive dancing body that “engages with and challenges static representations of gender, race, sexuality, and physical ability, all the while acknowledging how deeply these ideologies influence our daily experience” (Albright 1997, xiii). Flatfoot Dance Company draws on this foundation of activism in contemporary dance to dance in resistance against a nationalist discourse that invites xenophobia.

In 2017, following another wave of xenophobia that gripped Durban, Ruggedeyes and Girl Ruggedeyes, influential South African dance vloggers, posted a YouTube video where they danced the Bhenga as a way to protest against the xenophobic attacks. Bhenga dance is associated with Gqom, a relatively recent style of House music from South Africa that is itself influenced by House music from other countries and draws on Kwaito. Journalist Huw Oliver writes that “uploading YouTube videos of the genre’s associated dance, the ‘bhenga’ – all wavy arms, toe taps and wobbly knees – has become a fad” (Oliver 2016). In Bhenga, the dance style is influenced by the Kwasa-Kwasa (a dance style from the Congo) and dancers stress their flexibility with a sense of fluidity and ease. In his interview with Gqom producer Julz da DeeJay, DeeJay explains: “When you ‘bhenga’, you aim to create this very intriguing image of flexibility. The moves are intended to attract an audience, drawing people into a circle as they writhe” (ibid.). Bhenga both in its accessing of other African dance styles and in its physical form actively seeks to be expandable. In the video, the choreography shows the dancers changing direction with ease, moving with a softness as if almost their whole bodies are malleable multi-directional joints; their bodies seem to have no center, no suggestion of grounding, but rather a wave-like quality that ripples out beyond the screen and brings

their audience into the dance. In the YouTube video, Ruggedeyes states that they dance against xenophobia showing their awareness of how dance can be mobilized against xenophobia. Ruggedeyes’ and Girl Ruggedeyes’ choice of Bhenga with its fluidity, multidirectional movements, and a core commitment to be inclusive by drawing the audience into the dance, actively supports their anti-xenophobia position. In “New Durban Bhenga Dance: Stop Xenophobia” Ruggedeyes’ and Girl Ruggedeyes’ dancing bodies are an apt example of Randy Martin’s position that “dance displays, in the very ways that bodies are placed in motion, traces of the forces of contestation that can be found in society at large” (Martin 1998, 6).

In closing, South African dance culture highlights our connections to others by exploring our shared histories and our common dance languages. It offers strong examples for why and how South Africans need to remember and stress *Ubuntu* in response to xenophobia, a version of segregation. Dance creates opportunities to stress our interconnectedness, resist the narrative of “us” and “them,” and echo the peace marcher’s placard “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabany.*” As a nation of peoples who were defined by our appearances—and our accents—by a fascist racist state, it is vital that we seek out and stress our interconnections with others; to be us, we have to stress how we South Africans are *Makwerekwere*, too.

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Navigating State Ideologies Through Aesthetic Experimentations: Dance on Television at the Turn of the Century in China

Jingqiu Guan

Introduction

In the early 1990s in mainland China, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the new political and ideological atmosphere encouraged a relaxation of state media control, leading to the launch of new television programs, including programs featuring dance (Hong, Lü, and Zhou 2009). Meanwhile, the adoption of a new management system across television stations in the mid-1990s granted television producers decision-making power to design programs, control production finances, and oversee the production, leading to further innovation and diversification of television programs (ibid.). Under this political and cultural backdrop, Bai Zhiqun, a female dance artist, television producer, and director at the China Central Television (CCTV) at the time, introduced a new genre of dance and television production called “Dance TV” (or DTV) via the first “CCTV Television Dance Competition” broadcast on the network’s Channel 3 in 2000.² DTV refers specifically to video dance for television that creatively explores the interaction between the camera, dance, and editing, in contrast to recordings of live dance performances. However, because of its low audience rating, DTV did not become a cultural phenomenon but only sporadically appeared on television in the 2000s. Though short-lived, the very existence of these screen dance productions raises questions about how experimentation with dance on television

reconciles with ideological imperatives of the television space, and how such productions are imbricated in the project of the nation. I will address these questions using two dance television productions directed by Bai, *Shanwudanqing* (“Fan Dances Water Ink Painting,” 2001) and *Qingchunrijii* (“Diaries of Youth,” 2009), as examples that illustrate how experimentation of dance on television intertwines with China’s nation building project.

Shanwudanqing – Evoking Shared Cultural Imagination

Shanwudanqing is a DTV production adapted from a well-known Chinese classical dance piece of the same name for the stage. A response to the request from the technical unit of the CCTV to showcase newly invented technologies on television, this DTV production embodies a desire to demonstrate to the mass audience that televisual space in China is a productive site where modernization takes place.

In *Shanwudanqing*, the dancer Wang Yabin traverses a series of three-dimensional virtual environments of Chinese ink wash paintings that are simultaneously activated by the movement of her body. The video presents primarily wide shots that showcase Wang’s full body in motion with occasional inserts of medium and close-up shots of her upper body.

The inclusion of several extreme close-ups of her flipping fan works as a transition allowing for seamless cuts to a different environment. As Wang continues to perform her dance, the animated Chinese ink wash painting shifts the space and time where she is situated, from mountains to a bamboo forest, from a pool of lotus flowers to a garden of chrysanthemums, from morning to dusk, and from summer to fall. In this work, the body of a traditional Chinese character, as signified by her costume of a white silk dress of the Tang or Song dynasty, is equipped with the capacity to travel across difference spaces. This effortless spatial mobility is not simply a demonstration of the power of media technology; it also evokes the characteristic of the turn of the twenty-first century, modern Chinese body.²

The images of plants and flowers in the backdrop are loaded with culturally specific meanings that appear to be ancient and traditional. But many of their symbolic meanings are actually newly invented to serve the construction of the modern Chinese nation. For instance, in this work, plum flowers blossoming in the snow in the last scene assume a very specific connotation in contemporary Chinese culture, associated with the quality of perseverance and hard work under extreme, harsh conditions. This particular meaning comes from a contemporary proverb: “The fragrance of the plum flower comes from the bitter coldness of winter” (Wang 1982). This saying is often mistaken as an ancient poem or proverb. In fact, it was constructed in the 1960s during the socialist nation-building process to encourage positive spirits under harsh living conditions (Chen 2018). The plum flowers are but one among a number of Chinese cultural symbols that appear traditional and ancient in *Shanwudanqing* as a productive tool for building shared memories through perpetuating cultural heritage.

Yet, this preconceived shared culture is arbitrary and partial rather than all-inclusive. *Shanwudanqing* reinforces the so-called “essence” of China and being Chinese. This notion of Chineseness reflects a monolithic understanding that associates Chineseness with the dominant Han culture and the aura of the ancient time (Chow 2000). Works upholding this perspective contribute to the official call to rejuvenate national cultures for maintaining social stability and resisting the impact of Western cultures. Packaging together symbolic signs that imply shared cultural roots, *Shanwudanqing* takes part in a series of state-sponsored aesthetic constructions of Chinese nationalism that center on a purified vision of Chinese tradition absent from foreign influences.

Qingchunriji: Choreographing Modern Chinese Bodies

While *Shanwudanqing* contributes to the construction of a nationalist imagination by re-signifying traditional cultural symbols, *Qingchunriji*, broadcast on CCTV-3 on December 5, 2009, does so by constructing modern Chinese bodies through depicting ideal images of youth. In this video, male and female students at Shandong Art Institute dance out their college experiences of going through military training, eating in the dining hall, taking classes, playing sports during recess, studying in the library, building interpersonal relationships, and saying goodbye to each other at graduation. They perform heteronormative ideas of gender.

The video employs choreographic and cinematic devices to highlight these student’s disciplined, obedient, and collective bodies. To portray these students as a collective, the camera rarely highlights one person more than the other in order to convey a sense of uniformity in students’ experiences. Incidences of disunity are also present in each chapter to break the monotonic coherence of the scene. For instance, in the military training scene, a male student, running late, rushes to the queue to join the group; in the classroom scene, a student raises his arm and stands up as if he were to answer a question but then immediately covers his head in embarrassment. However, each dancer is immediately integrated back into the ensemble, either by inserting himself into the row in the former case or being pushed down to sitting by other students in the latter. These incidents of disorder are depicted as “mistakes” to be corrected, so the collective corpus can continue its actions harmoniously. These cinematic and choreographic decisions amplify the socialist ideal of personhood that is always in service of and subservient to a collective vision.

Besides situating the individual in the body of the collective, the dance video also displays a highly codified performance of gender that conforms to constructed gender ideals in contemporary China. While both male and female students are portrayed as physically skilled, female students are presented as performing more of the supporting roles behind one male lead character in school performances. Moreover, male and female students also display different qualities of movement through their facial choreographies. Male students always look into the camera with a stern face associated with masculinity, whereas female students always smile at the camera without revealing their teeth. Critiquing the absence of gender in the

dominant theoretical discourse on nationalism and nation (e.g. Gellner 1983 and Hobsbawm 1990), feminist scholar Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) argues that nationalism is also a gendered discourse, in which gender relations and nation building projects mutually inform and construct one another. Similarly, China studies' scholar Lisa Rofel (1999) points out that at specific historical moments, different notions of womanhood and manhood are desired as ideal for the construction of the Chinese nation. The gendered embodiment in *Qingchunriji* consistently exhibits the socio-ideological discourse of gender at the time, in which young men and women assume seemingly equal opportunities for education but are channeled into more stereotypical and traditional gender roles through the specific activities and facial expressions they are taught to perform. They thereby illustrate the ways that gendered performance contributes to nation-formation.

Conclusion

In sum, the way dance and moving image intersects in these two works seamlessly constructs modern Chinese bodies that align with the official discourse of modern Chinese nation at the turn of the century. This seamlessness reflects film theorist Jean-Louis Baudry's (1974) assertion that the cinematic apparatus works to conceal the very apparatus that constructs the film while reproducing the dominant ideology of the state. In these cases, it is the need of building national culture that is reproduced at the level of the body via cinematic means.³ Exploring how dance and the television medium can creatively integrate, Bai (2012) stresses the importance of taking into consideration the specific cultural function of television. According to Bai, DTV is not simply an experimentation on the "dance-video" relationship but a form of cultural production that conveys the responsibilities of instilling positive national values and spirits to a seemingly homogeneous Chinese audience. While these screen dance productions challenge and disrupt established aesthetic and conceptual structures of presenting dance on television, they also provide a new site where cultural nationalism can be exercised.

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Notes

1. In 1978, Beijing TV was renamed the China Central Television Station (CCTV), which signified the advent of the national television network (Lull and Sun 1988, 195). Until now, CCTV remains the only national cable broadcaster, a state-run enterprise. The CCTV currently has a total of 15 channels, from CCTV 1 to CCTV 15, each specializing in a particular category of program, covering a range of different topics including news, finance, arts, international programs, sports, films, military, agriculture, serial dramas, documentary, science, education, Chinese opera, society and law, children and youths, and music.
2. Connecting the dancer's illusory freedom of mobility in *Shanwudanqing* with modernity, I first evoke Harmony Bench's discussion of the political implication of a series of dance onscreen works that present dancing bodies wandering through different digitally constructed space with ease. Situating these works in the Euro-American context, Bench argues that the construct of this type of fluid site is associated with "a seemingly neutral space of global flow" (2008, 45), which is characteristic of modernity at large. In the context of mainland China, one of the phenomena associated with the process of modernization significantly increased spatial mobility of people at greater speed. In this way, the dancer's capacity of effortlessly traversing different spaces evokes the characteristic of the turn of the twenty-first century, modern Chinese body.
3. In his address at the 16th CPC Congress in 2002, Jiang Zemin, the then Chairman of the People's Republic of China emphasized the role of art and cultural productions in "[enhancing] the attraction and appeal of socialist culture with Chinese characteristics" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2002). Jiang's speech vividly demonstrates the Chinese party-state's nationalist position in exploring a uniquely Chinese path to modernization. This Chinese way relies on cultural productions for a successful dissemination

of socialist values. Broadcast through China's national television, these dance on television productions represent the authoritative voice of the political party, its ideologies and aesthetic ideals. They assume the function of reviving China's cultural traditions and evoking national spirit and map these values onto the cinematic and choreographic construction of the body on screen.

Rihanna and Choreographies of Black Nationhood on the *MTV Video Music Awards*

Raquel Monroe

Every fall I teach a first-year seminar course to one hundred and twenty students. Before the class convenes, I email the students and ask them to watch *MTV's Video Music Awards (VMAs)*. I feel confident that although *MTV* has fallen off the music map, the *VMAs* will offer up at least one interesting performance for us to discuss on our first day of class. At some point during the Labor Day weekend of 2016, I reluctantly fired up my computer to do the homework I assigned. I was curious about how the *VMAs* would honor Prince, who passed in April. I also thought there might be some resistance against the Trump campaign. I was overwhelmingly unprepared for the cacophony of blackness that rubbed up against American nationalism to celebrate the career of Caribbean immigrant, Robyn Rihanna Fenty. In a climate rife with American nationalism and putrid xenophobia, *MTV* awarded Rihanna, an immigrant and Barbados crossover artist, its most prestigious award—the *Michael Jackson Video Vanguard Award*. Rihanna in turn performed what one of my students shouting from the back of the lecture hall described as “pure Black joy!”

As the Vanguard awardee, Rihanna opened the show in pink overtones with a medley of her crossover dance hits. Dancers homogenized by matching hoodies accompanied her in syncopated, frontal unison. Nothing unusual or earth shattering here. It's what happened after the lackluster opening that confused me and had me searching the

Internets to see if anyone else noticed that the *VMAs* looked more like the *BET Awards*. The hosts, and the majority of presenters and performers were all of color. The closest thing to a hard rock music performance was Beyoncé's rendition of “Don't Hurt Yourself” from her *Lemonade* album.

I remember when *MTV* was all rock and roll, and all white, save for the occasional Michael Jackson or Prince video. I remember when the *VMAs* were a big deal because we might be able to see a Black artist perform live. I remember resenting Madonna for what I and Black girls and women throughout the U.S. recognized as her performance of Blackness, without the actual vocal chops the music industry required of Black female vocalists vying for record deals. I experienced extreme cognitive dissonance as I tried to reconcile my memories of what *MTV* and the *VMAs* were in the eighties against the undeniable Blackness Rihanna, the hosts, and the vast majority of performers served this evening. Hence, when Rihanna performed her dancehall medley, I nearly passed out.

“Come here rude boy, boy did you get up? Come here rude boy, boy is you big enough?”—the lyrics from her popular song “Rude Boy” pierce the dark silence in the studio audience. *Murder She Wrote*, a dancehall anthem supports her voice, and unearths my memories of discovering

Diasporic sounds beyond the New Jack Swing of the early nineties. The lights rise but the camera person struggles to find the superstar amidst a crowd of what looks like hundreds of Black folks dancing with each other, some holding the signifier of a homegrown house party—the notorious red cup. I’m confused, as I imagine other viewers are as well. “Did she bring all of her peoples with her from Barbados?” “Or did she just grab random Black folk from backstage and ask them if they want to be a part of the show?” It takes a moment to realize that there are ten female dancers performing choreography amidst the improvised social dancing. While Rihanna and the choreographed dancers are clearly the stars of the performance, the social dancers dancing in the background are the manifestation of Black joy and survival. The Black people on the stage strikingly contrast the predominately white Gen Z audience, who in the brief glimpses the camera provides of them, also seem a little bewildered. Dancehall is not currently trending amongst white American youth; it never really has. Its popularity spiked in the U.S. in the early nineties, and even then, the primary consumers were Black people.

I received my dancehall training in 1991–92 at Mingles, a small bar/club in lilywhite Scottsdale, Arizona. Every Sunday night, a small group of Black college students risked life and limb to travel to a part of town where our melanin put us at risk. However, our desire to discover and move with a Blackness outside of that which we were familiar, but still felt like our own, was life affirming. Mingles drew a different crowd of Blackness than the local R&B club and the Black Greek parties we frequented. Caribbean, African, and African Americans danced with one another at Mingles. Those of us who grew up outside of a Black Metropolis learned how to wine, how to move to a different vibe-sound-beat, a different kind of Blackness on the Mingles’ dance floor. We may have never travelled to the Caribbean, or ever even heard of Crop Over, or danced in Carnival, but on Sunday nights or dancing bodies choreographed a magnificent Black Nation. A nation that could thrive amidst the structural racism we grew accustomed to in Arizona.

Rihanna’s dancehall performance at the VMAs not only conjured my memories of dancing to dancehall, but also performed the aesthetics of a resilient Black Nation. Through dancehall, Rihanna invited us all to share in her Diasporic identity. Collectively we danced across arbitrary borders. We transformed the MTV stage into a dancehall party and invoked an imagined Jamaica, and a united Caribbean.

Created in Kingston, Jamaica by disenfranchised Black youth, dancehall evidences Black alchemy. It is yet another example of how Black youth around the world survive predatory capitalism, and structural racism to mine the ghetto for gold. As reggae’s spirited offspring, dancehall holds a paradoxical position in Jamaican society. In Jamaica it is associated with violence and poverty yet provides all performers an opportunity to change their socio-economic status. It is chastised for its explicit lyrics yet lauded as a space for women to (re)claim their erotic agency. Performed in the U.S. by a Caribbean artist, dancehall transforms into a deterritorialized signifier of the Caribbean and its Blackness. Rihanna’s performance further situated Blackness beyond the United States’ borders, defying the nation’s increasingly nationalist and anti-immigrant climate.

The VMAs aired on the heels of the 2016 Olympics in Rio, Brazil, in which a record-breaking number of Black women around the globe medaled in their respective events. The historic performance by Black women enticed even the most reticent amongst us to chant “USA!” “USA!” The nationalist chant is differently weighted however, when it sits alongside the dubious call to “Make America Great Again” shouted at the Republican National Convention weeks earlier. Prior to Rihanna’s dancehall set, the VMA’s audience welcomed Michael Phelps, the highly decorated U.S Olympic champion swimmer, to the stage with chants of “USA!” “USA!” The audience also welcomed the USA women’s gymnastics team with the familiar mantra when later in the evening, and before Rihanna took the stage for her third set, the young Olympians presented Beyoncé with the Best Female Video Award. While chants of “USA” is the expected soundscape at the Olympic games, its boisterous emergence from the crowd at what feels like a Black awards show, quickly reminds us that this is not the *BET Awards* but the VMAs where like the Olympics, Black girls won. . . everything.

In her acceptance speech, the Bajan immigrant rhetorically aligned herself and her award with the victorious Olympians scattered throughout the Diaspora. Graciously she claims, “And so you know my success it started as my dream but now my success is not my own, you know it’s my family’s, it’s my fans, it’s my country, the Caribbean as a whole, it’s women, Black women.” Her speech act constructs an imaginary nation of women, but the dancehall performance choreographs a Black nation embodied by the people. Without the dancers she performed with for her dancehall set, and those of us

inspired to dance alongside them at home, the claims to nation she gestured towards in her speech would mirror the nationalistic chants of the audience. Like the Olympic athlete, Rihanna would be yet another super-human receiving notoriety, financial gain, and nationalistic pride for accomplishing feats the average human cannot imagine. But the bodies dancing alongside Rihanna, around her, behind her perform Barbados, Trinidad, Jamaica, the Caribbean, and the Diaspora. We do not leave her alone to stand in for our nation. Collectively we perform Blackness in all of its glorious power. Our dancing bodies evidence a Black nation that stays on “the ready.”

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When Time Won't Tell: Power, Performance, and Ethnicity in Sri Lanka

Ahalya Satkunararatnam and Venuri Perera

On October 26, 2018, there was a constitutional coup in Sri Lanka when the Executive President, Maithripala Sirisena, attempted to appoint the former President, Mahinda Rajapaksa, as his Prime Minister, thus ousting the current Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremasinghe. Less than two weeks later, the Executive President attempted to dissolve parliament and call for elections. Citizens gathered every evening in Colombo, calling the coup unconstitutional. A choreographer ventured to be present at the gathering. With body and face fully covered, the choreographer attempted to hide the identifications that are politically deployed to divide common people—class, ethnicity,¹ and gender.² Masking voice, hands, feet, and body, the choreographer alternated between three different masks that loosely represented the three men at the crux of the crisis, the President, Former President, and Prime Minister. Standing with two bunches of bananas and next to a sign from the larger protest that read “Horn for Democracy,” the choreographer held another sign that corrected the official name of the state, “Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, to the moniker “Banana Republic of Sri Lanka.” “Banana Republic” did not simply imply the political instability of a country, of the exploitation of one country by other governments, or the stratification of classes, but linked personally to local rituals and stories involving the fruit.³ Over the course of the evening, the choreographer engaged in various conversations with those that approached, learning of financial difficulties, the feelings of hopelessness, and the exhaustion with the elite in power.

At the time of the coup in October 2018, gathering in protest seemed possible and relatively safe. Today, in the aftermath of the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, protest in support of a minority community is suspected of ethnic apologism and perceived as a threat to a burgeoning and “necessary” nationalism that promises safety in the nation. Thus, time has strongly shaped experience—of movement, both in terms of political mobilization and in terms of arts and their meanings—in Sri Lanka. We—two choreographers and dancers, one based in Sri Lanka and one from the diaspora—convened to write this essay via *WhatsApp* on April 19, 2019, three days before the Easter Sunday attacks. In the days and weeks following, there was a shut-down of social media, an established curfew, and violent retaliations against the Muslim community, displacing several families. Time has strongly shaped what we share today, by limiting our connections and changing our focus. Time—the duration of politicians’ reigns, the encounters with spectacular violence—influences dance and dancers, shapes choreography and its staging, and affects the movement of artists within and beyond borders of the nation. The discussion that follows explores what are seen as *unpredictable cycles* in Sri Lanka through performance. They are unpredictable as they are shaped by a moment in a future unknown, but as cycles, these moments return us to a familiar. As Sharika Thiranyagama states in response to the Easter Sunday attacks, “We have been here before” (2019).

Returning to the protest to the potential coup in October 2018, the desire of the choreographer to make their identity absent is significant to our discussion of nation and performance in Sri Lanka. Ethnicity was central to the 26-year war (1983–2009) between the predominantly, ethnically Sinhala Government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil ethnic separatists, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE).⁴ Dance was made ethnic with the rising nationalism in Sri Lanka. As Bharatanatyam emerged in India and its popularity and potential (for upper caste and class women) circulated transnationally, it became a significant dance that crossed boundaries of ethnicity and religion (Satkunaratnam 2013).⁵ In 1956, the popularity of the dance form among Sinhala women of economic and caste privilege encouraged the Sri Lankan state to create its own distinct and national form as a reflection of the Sinhala Buddhist nation. Kandyan dance is a “recontextualisation” of the Buddhist ritual practice *kohombakankariya* (Reed 2009). As nationalism strengthened into and with war, dance and ethnic identity were intertwined, Tamil to Bharatanatyam; Sinhala to Kandyan. Bharatanatyam became a form used not only to advance the Tamil nationalism of the LTTE, but also for inserting Tamilness outside the values of the LTTE, and for inserting meaningful and token inclusion under conditions of nationalist exclusion by the state (O’Shea 2016; Satkunaratnam 2013).

As ethnicity was tied to performance by the state in conjunction with war, it would remain so post-war.⁶ In fall 2009, just months after the end of the war, a commercial for the “Bring Back the Child” campaign presented a girl-child-soldier superimposed over an image of a Bharatanatyam dancer with the slogan: “She wants to be a dancer, not a child soldier.” The campaign was on behalf of the Office of the President’s Programme of Rehabilitation. The dancer brought together two pervasive representations of Sri Lankan Tamil girlhood: soldier and the Bharatanatyam dancer. The government projected its image as one of “No Tolerance” of child recruitment. Ironically, to defeat the LTTE the government allied with former LTTE members known for recruiting children.⁷

The years following the war brought fruitful connections across lands that were previously inaccessible. We ourselves met through the 2013 symposium, “War and Peace: Visual Narratives of Sri Lanka” that brought together contemporary artists across the country. It was a moment of heated discussions of the privileges and disadvantages

produced in war. It illuminated that although the war was over, healing—whatever that meant in terms of recourse and belonging—were longer and harder conversations and processes. There, a range of visual and performing artists, many trained in “traditions” of local aesthetic forms, were creatively commenting on the militarism of the state and the militarism of the *everyday* during the 26-year war.

Reconciliation is usually connected with the “exposure of truth” (Ntsebeza as quoted in Cole 2007, 184–86). It was revealed that the Sri Lankan Government knew of and perhaps colluded to hide the attacks on Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019 (Gettleman, Mashal and Bastians 2019, Francis 2019). As ISIS claimed responsibility, the attacks amplified a persistent Islamophobia. Five years ago, Venuri Perera, a contemporary dancer trained in Kandyan dance and co-author of this work, choreographed *Kesel Maduwa*, a commentary on the rise of the right-wing during the post-war period. The piece was a response to a violent speech by Buddhist monks, which led to attacks and hate speech against the Muslim minority community that started taking place in 2014 (Hisano 2017). In an interview with Atsuko Hisano for the Japan Foundation, Perera says,

In Sri Lanka, monks are of a high social position and even the police cannot interfere with them. Being a Buddhist and also Sinhalese, I was so ashamed and angry about these incidents. I was commissioned to do the opening piece for “Colomboscope” festival, with the theme “Making History” in 2014, I used this opportunity to create this work. In this piece, I look at religious and racial extremism as fringe insanity creeping into the core of society that needs to be exorcised with this “ritual” (Hisano 2017).

Kesel Maduwa performs a satirical ritual that removes discrimination. The works of protest call into question the absurdity and persistence of nationalism and the violence in its outcome that is stoked by religion.

Time often holds a promise in war, it clasps the *chance* of change, while the repetition of events holds patience and knowledge and through time, may break the cycle:

“We have been here before” (Thiranagama 2019).

“Hope has been murdered, yet there’s no reason to despair” (a headline of the *Sri Lanka Brief* soon after the constitutional crisis in October 2018).

The Easter Sunday attacks may entangle the country deeper in the mechanisms of the twenty-plus year American- and NATO-led Global War on Terror while securing the return of former hardline-nationalist officials to office. Amid threats to the safety of Muslims in the country, Muslim ministers of the government abandoned their seats. The choice in time holds the *promise* of safety for their communities (Bastians and Mashal 2019). The choreographer at the opening of our discussion now mobilizes for the safety of people internally displaced through the threat of retaliatory violence.

War, riots, and targeted attacks on particular ethnic communities can be viewed as occurring between those “who lived in the same local words” where neighbors and neighborhoods were transformed through violence in its mundane and momentous forms (Das and Kleinman 2000, 1). In considering lived, and “same local worlds,” we wish to emphasize strongly how the government of Sri Lanka throughout the war and until now, in the post-war era, has constructed climates of ethnic difference. Ethnicity as a homogeneous and given category can disguise how difference is also created and reified through the government’s intervention on behalf of the safety of some communities and its suspicion and abandonment of others. The government of Sri Lanka throughout the duration of the war and in the post-war era constructed climates of ethnic difference and would seek to do so through performance.⁸ Time shapes collaboration and staging, it shapes the *time* for dance, and *the* dance.

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Notes

1. Sri Lanka is split in terms of language between Tamil and Sinhala speakers, but these two languages are spoken across religion and ethnicity and yet are inscribed onto identity, subsequently framing the popular understandings of the ethnic conflict as one between Tamils and the Sinhala people (Thiranagama 2011, 12). The largest community in terms of ethnicity is the Sinhala who speak Sinhala, of whom the majority are Theravada Buddhists, the minority of whom practice various dominations of Christianity. Tamil speakers are composed of different ethnic groups. The Sri Lankan Tamils are the largest Tamil-speaking minority group and are central to the ethnic conflict. Sri Lankan Tamils are composed of Hindus and Christians and are classified by the categories of language and ethnicity. The second-largest minority are Muslims. Although Tamil-speaking, Muslims are identified by the categories of religion and ethnicity. The third-most significant Tamil-speaking minority are the Malayaha Tamils, who are descendants of South Indian plantation labor brought by the British (Thiranagama 2011, 13). Neil DeVotta (2000; 2004) and A. Jeyaratnam Wilson (2000) discuss how racial labels were assigned to language practices and Sinhala was accepted as a descendant of Sanskrit and Pali, thus Aryan, while the Tamil language was labeled as Dravidian. These two authors explore how the British Empire contributed to differences between the Tamils and the Sinhala. But, as Thiranagama states, "The British did not 'invent' ethnicity in Sri Lanka." However, the ways in which they made sense of the island's social and religious heterogeneity was through "popular Victorian ideas of race, linking this to religion and language differences," which became more "solid and 'ethnic'" when they were linked to political structures (2011, 21).

2. We are choosing to keep the identity of the choreographer hidden in this paper as a demonstration of the alliance with their performance. Disclosing the choreographer's identity would put them at risk during a time of increased surveillance (since the Easter Sunday attacks on April 21, 2019 when six bombs across the country deployed in a coordinated attack). The state has returned to an increased point of surveillance and over 300 people have been arrested in connection (Press Trust of India 2019). We are both choreographers of contemporary work rooted in strong dance traditions in Sri Lanka—Kandyan Dance and Bharatanatyam. We write this as commentators who had access to the choreographer's process.
3. Bananas are a prevalent fruit in Sri Lanka and are also presented for religious rituals as part of gifts and donations.
4. War, in its mundane and spectacular forms, reified ethnic difference, segregating people and geographies throughout the country, deploying a logic of bias based on populations and percentages as its own citizens fled violence and trauma, changing the rubrics of representation over the course of the war (See De Votta 2000, 2004; Kanaaneh 2002; Wilson 2000).
5. Bharatanatyam's association with the pre-colonial and as a social reform that benefited one's community and country as a marker of tradition—although a newly formed one—created a universal aesthetic appreciated across communities in colonial South and South East Asia. The form attracted women of various backgrounds (Meduri 1996, O'Shea 2007).
6. The war was declared as over in May 2009 with the killing of the leadership of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. It has been argued that both the LTTE and the Sri Lanka armed forces caused severe civilian casualties (Ethirajan 2009; "Sri Lanka Says" 2009)
7. The Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal was formed in 2004 by Muralitharan, known as Colonel Karuna, who was the LTTE head of the Eastern Province for more than twenty years. Since the end of the war, Karuna served as a minister of Parliament (2008–15) in the Rajapaksa government. In 2017, he launched a new political party, the Tamil United Freedom Party (Press Trust of India 2017).
8. Discussing the local is not to undo or minimize the ways in which transnational circulations of security, aid, diplomacy, trade, and culture continue to unevenly shape the country (see Kadirgamar 2010; 2015).

The Aesthetic Nationalism of Exile: Hidden Transcripts from the Thai-Myanmar Border

Tani Sebro

Many, perhaps most, hidden transcripts remain just that: hidden from public view and never “enacted.” And we are not able to tell easily under what precise circumstances the hidden transcript will storm the stage (Scott 1990, 16).

The Tai, a heterogeneous group of peoples who live in the borderlands of Myanmar and Thailand, are currently experiencing an intense fracturing of their sense of sovereignty as a nation due to ongoing hostilities between the Tatmadaw (Burmese military) and Shan State army rebel groups. They identify as being a part of an imagined Tai nation and reject subjugation by the Burman authorities (Jirattikorn 2008; Aye 2010).¹ Following the 1962 Military coup in Myanmar, approximately 300,000 Tai peoples have fled from Myanmar to neighboring Thailand, where they enjoy no official protections as refugees.² Despite representing the largest ethnic minority group in Myanmar, and possibly the largest displaced group of clandestine migrants from Myanmar who have fled to neighboring Thailand, the Tai have been systematically ignored by humanitarian and governmental institutions (Norum, Mostafanezhad, and Sebro 2016; Sebro 2017). The Tai, like many exiled groups, face deportations and harassment from police. Yet for many, life as a migrant offers the possibility of aesthetic expression around the common refrain of love for *Merng Tai*, the Tai Nation.

During ethnographic and ethnochoreological fieldwork along the Thai-Myanmar border, undertaken from 2014–15 and again in 2017, I learned that Tai migrants are currently engaged in a capacious movement to reinvigorate their performing arts modality called *Jaad Tai*, or Tai Opera, a staged performance based in the Theravada Buddhist tradition of song, dance and theater presented primarily on the grounds of a *wat*, or temple. The following essay gives an account of what James C. Scott calls a “hidden transcript” or a contrapuntal account that differs from the public transcript in that its true meaning remains hidden from authorities (Scott 1990, 4). This could also be called “a backstage account” or a narrative that alludes to subtle strategies Tai migrants enact when evading the gaze of Thai authorities during religious and cultural performances along the Thai border with Myanmar. I then provide an analysis of how such hidden transcripts provide insights into how exiled groups often seek to form an *aesthetic nationalism*, a sense of togetherness and belonging through the performing arts, that brings succor and consistency during times of upheaval.

The Backstage Account

Behind the stage constructed of plywood and bamboo, draped with colorful fabrics that frame the performers on stage, sits a company of two-dozen dancers awaiting their turn under the spotlights. An



Photo 1: Wai Khru (Giving Respect to the Teachers) Ceremony before a Jaad Tai (Tai Opera) Performance. Chiang Mai Province, Thailand. Photo by the Author.

ensemble of six musicians sit on the floor to the right of the stage and deliver a steady rhythm of percussion (drum), melody (stringed violin/harp), and tune (cymbals). A crowd of three-hundred merry onlookers are streaming into the Tai Theravada Buddhist temple in Chiang Mai, Thailand amidst booths selling noodles and T-shirts. Along the perimeter of the temple grounds runs a busy street where Thai police officers have set up a checkpoint, randomly stopping those entering the festival. Checkpoints in areas where many migrants and migrant laborers gather are not uncommon, but it is creating an uneasy atmosphere in the temple tonight.

Backstage, I rehearse the steps taught to me by my teacher, knowing well that my body has yet to internalize the choreography. My muscles still stutter and mispronounce the phrases uttered by my limbs. Then, my teacher, Sai Khoe, calmly, but sternly informs me that, “We’re going to do a different dance.”³ She smiles. “Just follow along. You’ll be fine.” I have only been training with the ensemble for a few months and my knowledge of their repertoire is still as a novice, so this news of performing an unknown choreography makes me nervous. Sai Khoe whispers that I will need to be a stand in for a dancer who cannot go

on stage. “The checkpoint,” she says. “One of our dancers is afraid of being held by the police,” and she gestures for me to enter onto the stage in her stead.

The curtain opens and we enter the stage. Four women, three in perfect unison and one—a dance researcher—stumbles and strains under the floodlights while the crowd cheers uproariously. It takes a few long, embarrassing minutes, but I finally find the steady rhythm of the drum and cymbal. Our hands bend backwards, lifting up and with a flick of a wrist, turn in towards the body as we gently sway from side to side while bringing one foot before the other to the beat of the *mong*. Then, a woman gestures for me to come to the edge of the stage and slips a paper garland over my head. I press my palms together to “*wai*” while bowing my head in gratitude. I keep dancing and stuttering. Audience members laugh at the sight of an outsider who obviously does not know the dance and offer garlands of consolation until my neck is covered in colorful paper loops.

As the dance concludes, I walk backstage and my friend Hom stops to tell me how he enjoyed the performance. I lament that I hadn’t rehearsed the steps and was embarrassed. But he countered, “You dance from the heart. You dance as if you *rak Merng Tai* (you love Tai-land).” It was in that moment that I realized that the skill level of a dancer is of less importance than the function she plays. Both for the audience who enjoyed a comedic performance and for the dancer who feared for her safety, in that moment I was functioning as a distraction. The switching out of dancers served as a hidden transcript, or a moment revealing how important it is to pay attention to what happens backstage, in addition to the public transcript—what was occurring on stage and at the checkpoints. My teacher’s quick-witted decision to switch me for another dancer illustrates the subtle and often imperceptible ways migrants evade the gaze of authorities, while still managing to perform and enact their nation, through a shared commitment to an aesthetic form of nationalism. The following section theorizes the hidden transcript as a function of an aesthetically based notion of nationalism for peoples in exile.

Aesthetic Nationalism

The theatrical dance performances of Tai exiles in the Thai-Myanmar border-zone are expressive of their desire to create a nation within which they may be sovereign unto themselves. The function of the hidden transcript, which can take many forms, is to enmesh small

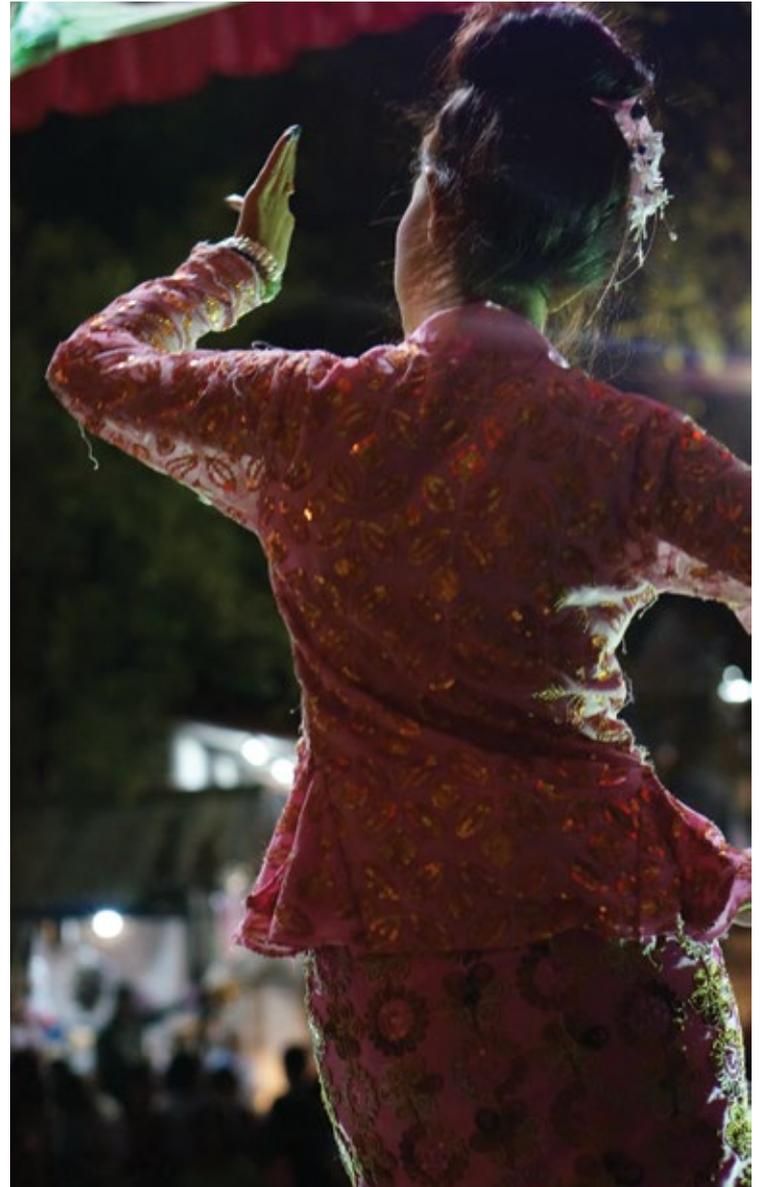


Photo 2: Tai dancer during a Jaad Tai performance. Chiang Mai Province, Thailand. Photo by the Author.

acts of resistance in everyday acts, including aesthetic practices. Tai dancers and performers practice their arts against great odds; many work long hours in dangerous sectors and many are living in Thailand without a work visa. Travel in the border-zone is strictly controlled and whenever large gatherings occur, Thai police are often present. Thus, the very act of dancing *Jaad Tai* on a stage is in some contexts subversive and risk-filled.

Following the work of Benedict Anderson (1991) on print-capitalism and its relationship to the emergence of nation-states, scholars of the Tai peoples in Shan State and in the diaspora have so far mainly focused their attention on how print media, literature, karaoke, and radio have served as an integral part of Tai nation-building (Jirattikorn 2008; Ferguson 2015; Woodier 2008; Brooten 2016). I, too, consider these mechanisms as essential components that structure sentiments towards the nation. However, print and media dissemination do not tell the whole story. As we learn from dance and performance scholars, nations are also formed aesthetically and performatively (Reed 2010; Larasati 2013; Savigliano 1995; Chasteen 2004). Via the process of what may be called aesthetic nationalism, or the investment in a shared aesthetic that allows a people to constitute an independent nation, exiled Tai peoples are able to assert a sovereign and autonomous domain in their performative, textual, visual and artistic forms of expression.

Conclusion

What may be considered under the rubric of aesthetic nationalism is myriad. Aesthetic nationalisms are shared forms of expression that generate group coherence through collective investments in a common aesthetic. Aesthetic nationalisms are also performative, often non-textual, and therefore ineffable forms of communication. Performers in exile often enact a communal politics that is creative, multitudinous, and continuously evolving through the work of kinesthetic empathy (Foster 2010; McNeill 1997), which forms the basis for a performative aspect to an aesthetic nationalism. Understanding nationalism as aesthetically mediated, performers in exile challenge the textually based paradigm in politics for what constitutes a nation.

Through hidden transcripts and backstage narratives, exiled peoples may forge a sense of common belonging through small acts of rebellion, deception, and resistance. In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, James C. Scott cautions that

the public transcript usually prevails over the hidden transcript, yet attending to the interaction between the hidden and public transcript, “uncovers contradictions and possibilities, that looks well beneath the placid surface that the public accommodation to the existing distribution of power, wealth, and status often presents” (1990, 15). By recognizing the many acts of resistance—and persistence—that exist amongst subordinate groups, we may come closer to understanding the relationship between aesthetics and nationalism.

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Sebro, Tani. 2017. "Uneven Humanitarianism: Abandoned Refugees in the Thai-Myanmar Border-Zone." *Review of Human Rights* 2 (1): 65–86.

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speakers of the proto-Tai language and include the Tai Yai, Tai Lue, Tai Dam and many other Tai/Dai ethnic groups. I use Tai in order to honor the wishes of my research collaborators from the Shan State in Myanmar, a vast majority of whom responded that they prefer foreigners to use the endonym Tai, rather than Shan when referring to the peoples of Shan State and its diaspora.

2. Tai migrants are not counted in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) statistical databases. For a closer explication of their exclusion, see Tani Sebro. "Uneven Humanitarianism: Abandoned Refugees in the Thai-Myanmar Border-Zone." *Review of Human Rights* 2, no. 1 (2017): 65–86.
3. To protect their identities, all names of research collaborators referenced in the essay are pseudonyms.

Endnotes

1. Scholars referring to the Tai peoples of Upland Southeast Asia most commonly use the word Shan. Shan however, is an exonym that the Tai peoples themselves largely reject. The Burman ethnic group used the word Shan, a cognate of Siam, to refer to the Siamese (Thai) people, with which the Tai are linguistically and culturally similar, but historically distinct. The term Tai refers to the heterogeneous group of peoples who are descendants or

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Dr. Sarahleigh Castelyn, performer, choreographer, researcher and a dance nerd, is a Reader in Performing Arts at the University of East London where she teaches on the undergraduate BA (Hons) Dance: Urban Practice programme and supervises students on postgraduate and research programmes. Her dance research focuses on race, gender, sexuality, and nation in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, the politics of hybridity, and the use of practice as a research methodology. She has performed in and choreographed dance works, for example at Jomba! Contemporary Dance Festival (South Africa) and The Playhouse (South Africa). She serves on a number of editorial and organisation boards, such as *The South African Dance Journal* and *HOTFOOT*. She has published research on dance and South Africa, for instance in *Viral Dramaturgies* (2018) and *Narratives in Black British Dance* (2018), and in journals such as *The African Performance Review*, *Dance Theatre Journal*, *Animated*, *African Performance Review*, and *The South African Theatre Journal*. She is currently working on a monograph on contemporary dance in South Africa in which she explores when and how, and to what effect, the body in South African contemporary dance post-apartheid is a toyi-toying body. Toyi-Toying is a South African dance motif that occurs at protests and is a powerful piece of choreography that creates a charged atmosphere. The book's research makes apparent the relationship between political action and the dancing body and shows how South African contemporary dance choreographers makes visible the complex, fluid, multiple, and contradictory nature of South African identity politics.

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Idoia Murga Castro (History of Art, PhD, 2011) is Tenured Researcher at Instituto de Historia, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC) in Madrid. She has a degree in Classical Dance from the Royal Academy of Dance and the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing. Between 2012 and 2018 she was Assistant Professor at Universidad Complutense de Madrid. She has been Visiting Scholar at Columbia University, UNAM, Universidad de Buenos Aires, INHA (CNRS-Paris IV Sorbonne) and PhD Occasional Student at The Courtauld Institute of Art. She has curated and coordinated various exhibitions and written books and papers about the relationship between dance and the visual arts in the 20th century, Spanish art, the exile of 1939 and women artists. She is Principal Researcher of the R&D&I project: *Ballets Espagnols (1927–1929): A Dance Company for the Internationalization of Modern Art* (MCIU/AEI, ERC2018-092829).

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Dr. Rose Martin is a Senior Lecturer in Dance Studies and the Associate Dean (Academic) in Creative Arts and Industries, at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. From January 2020, she will take up the position of Associate Professor of Arts Education with a focus on Multiculturalism, at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Rose has extensive experience in research and teaching in the Middle East, Europe and Asia. Her research interests include dance education; dance ethnography; dance in post-colonial contexts; dance and politics and cross-cultural dance education. Dr. Rose Martin is the author of the following books: *Talking Dance: Contemporary Histories from the Southern Mediterranean* (2014) with Associate Professor Nicholas Rowe and Associate Professor Ralph Buck; *Dance, Diversity and Difference: Performance and identity politics in Northern Europe and the Baltic* (2017) with Professor Eeva Anttila; and is the sole author of *Women, Dance and Revolution: Performance and Protest in the Southern Mediterranean* (2016).

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Venuri Perera is a Colombo based choreographer and performance artist. Her work inhabits a space between dance, live art and theater and has dealt with issues of violent nationalism, patriarchy, borders, and class. Primarily trained in classical Kandyen dance, Venuri was

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Tani Sebro is Assistant Professor of Politics and Global Studies at Humboldt State University. Her research and teaching interests span the subdisciplines of political ethnography, critical political theory, performance studies, mobilities studies, aesthetics, and international relations with a particular emphasis on refugee politics in Southeast Asia. Her work has appeared in *Critique of Anthropology*, the *Review of Human Rights* and *American Ethnologist*. Her in-progress book manuscript, *Aesthetic Nationalism: The Dance of War and Exile along the Thai-Myanmar Border*, is based on embedded field research in Northern Thailand, where she conducts ethnographic research with Tai refugees and migrants from Myanmar. Her research has received funding from the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Fulbright U.S. Scholar ASEAN Program.

Arshiya Sethi

Independent scholar, Dr. Arshiya Sethi, twice a recipient of the Fulbright Fellowship, writes and speaks on cultural issues, in India and internationally. In over three decades as Consultant, building tangible and intangible cultural equities, she was presenter for the Indian State television channel, Doordarshan, for the archival value National Programme of Dance and Music (1980–2010), and dance critic for the Times of India (1987–1991). She writes on the arts for many journals and newspapers, and currently has a featured column, called "Soch" ("Contemplation"), available on the dance portal, Narthaki Online, that interrogates issues around the arts. She was Advisor for Dance on India's National Arts Television Channel, DD Bharati, where she successfully steered the creation of an Asia-Pacific International Dance showcase, the Asian Broadcasting Union's Television Dance Festival. In 2003, she established the Kri Foundation, which promotes different ways of looking at the Arts, especially "artivism," art directed at activism. Her doctoral research was on the politics of patronage and recognition of the eighth classical dance style of India, Sattriya, from Assam. She has presented several papers at international conferences and contributed several chapters in globally significant publications on dance and the culture of India. Her current scholarly research focuses on diasporic constituencies of dance, and through a multi-disciplinary lens, on cultural ecology at the intersection of politics and society, governance, gender, environment, cultural rights, and identity issues.

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Cover photos: Left: "Dancer, Nadia Khattab, Ramallah". Photography by ASH. Upper right: Flatfoot Dance Company's *Homeland (Security)* (2016). Choreographed by Liane Loots. Performed at The Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre, Durban, South Africa, April 6–10, 2016. Photographed by Val Adamson. Dancers, from left to right: Sanele Maphumulo, Zinhle Nzama, Sifiso Khumalo, Kim McCusker, Tshediso Kabulu and Jabu Siphika. Lower right: Youth participants exploring Runyege dance of the Banyoro people of Western Uganda during Equation event at Uganda National Cultural Center in Kampala.