

# CONVERSATIONS ACROSS THE FIELD OF DANCE STUDIES



## *Decolonizing Dance Discourses*

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CONVERSATIONS ACROSS THE FIELD OF DANCE STUDIES

*Decolonizing Dance Discourses*

# Table of Contents

## **Preface |**

Anurima Banerji and Royona Mitra: Guest Co-Editors ..... 4

## **OPENING WORDS**

Takiyah Nur Amin..... 6

## **Black Women Respond to a Double Pandemic: "The Emotional W(ait)eight" |**

Crystal U. Davis and Nyama McCarthy-Brown..... 10

## **The Politics of Naming the South Indian Dancer |**

Nrithya Pillai..... 13

## **It is Time for a Caste Reckoning in Indian "Classical" Dance |**

Anusha Kedhar..... 16

## **Discussing the Undiscussable, Part 2; or, This Might Hurt Your Feelings |**

Nadine George-Graves ..... 20

## **2019 GATHERINGS**

### **Introductory Remarks |**

Anurima Banerji and Royona Mitra ..... 22

### **On Dance**

#### **Black Laws of Dance |**

Jasmine Johnson..... 25

#### **The Problem with "Dance" |**

Prarthana Purkayastha..... 28

#### **RUXIMIK QAK'U'X: Inextricable Relationalities in Mayan Performance Practice |**

Maria Firmino-Castillo..... 31

### **On Choreography**

#### **Decentering Choreography: Natya as Postcolonial Performance-making |**

Cynthia Ling Lee..... 36

#### **Dancing on Violent Ground: George Balanchine and Urban Depopulation |**

Arabella Stanger..... 39

## On Technique

<b>Women Dancers and Morality in Bangladesh  </b> Munjulika Tarah .....	43
--	----

<b>Marie Bryant's Demonstrative Body and the Reproductive Labor of Transmitting Technique  </b> Anthea Kraut.....	46
--	----

<b>Decolonizing Gender Binaries, Decolonizing "Care"  </b> Clare Croft .....	49
---	----

## On Training

<b>(Home) Training in Breaking Culture  </b> Imani Kai Johnson .....	51
---	----

<b>Performing Performative Decolonizing  </b> Shanti Pillai.....	54
---	----

<b>The Materiality of Knowledge in Filipino Martial Arts Training  </b> Janet O'Shea.....	57
--	----

## CLOSING WORDS

<b>Love and "Looking": Rituals of Immersion  </b> Melissa Blanco Borelli .....	60
---	----

<b>Bibliography</b> .....	63
---------------------------	----

<b>Contributors</b> .....	69
---------------------------	----

<b>News</b> .....	73
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# Preface

*Anurima Banerji and Royona Mitra*

This special issue of *Conversations* is dedicated to the theme of "Decolonizing Dance Discourses," framed by critiques of anti-Black racism and caste injustice in our discipline.

When we accepted the invitation to co-edit this special issue, we set out with the intent to present the proceedings of two Gatherings on decoloniality that we organized for the 2019 Dance Studies Association (DSA) conference "Dancing in Common" at Northwestern University. At that event, we critically examined the operations of major keywords in our discipline, across the differences of geography, culture, and genre, to understand their specific constructions and interrupt any assumption about their uniform or uncontested reception. The Gathering on August 9, 2019, featured presentations by Jasmine Johnson, Prarthana Purkayastha, and Maria Firmino-Castillo on "dance," with Cynthia Ling Lee, Anusha Kedhar, and Arabella Stanger discussing "choreography." On August 10, 2019, Munjulika Tarah, Anthea Kraut, and Clare Croft addressed "technique," while Imani Kai Johnson, Shanti Pillai, and Janet O'Shea spoke on "training." We saw this colloquium as a necessary move towards decolonizing the foundational terms in our field--part of an ongoing endeavour, allied with the work done by a whole lineage of intellectual predecessors.

However, this summer's resurgence of the #BlackLivesMatter

movement across the United States and beyond compelled us to stop and reflect on the need of the hour in dance studies. We believe this moment calls for us to think deeply about how to navigate the exigencies illuminated by these anti-racist protests, and address them meaningfully in our field--especially since this is the first issue of *Conversations* to be published after a summer of revolutionary hope and struggle. As co-editors of South Asian heritage and highly conscious of rife anti-Blackness in our own communities, it is imperative to us both that we work in the spirit of solidarity with these struggles.

But something else shook our field this summer. Through a series of timely interventions on social media, the casteist field-making and structural discriminations of the South Asian dance world were exposed by caste-oppressed artists, revealing the complicity of caste-privileged South Asian dance scholars in this exclusionary project. We share this as a way to foreground the persistence of not just race but also other hegemonic structures which remain foundational in our dance communities, and urge us to recognise that these are necessary reckonings for dance studies to move forward in a socially just way that is truly intersectional.

Additionally, there are many oppressive global structures and major events that we are not acknowledging in this issue: from the repression

of protests in Hong Kong, Kashmir, and Nigeria, Uighur internment camps in China, the targeting of dissenting scholars, journalists, activists, and artists in Brazil, Hungary, India, Poland, Turkey, Russia... and the list goes on. All happening in the context of a deadly coronavirus pandemic and climate catastrophe. We have so much more work to do in terms of considering these phenomena, in and for our field.

The 2019 DSA Gatherings allowed us to think about how to question and pluralize the linguistics of movement vocabularies in our field and discuss a variety of intersectional approaches to dance analysis. While the themes and contents we visited there certainly overlap with concerns brought up by dance artists, educators, and activists allied with the #BlackLivesMatter and caste justice movements, we felt it was important to place the Gatherings contributions from last year in dialogue with current political developments and make this issue a coalitional project. In doing this, our publication offers an opportunity for Conversations to begin responding to DSA's strong call for action: "The Dance Studies Association strongly and unequivocally condemns global anti-Blackness and white supremacy."

To learn and unlearn through solidarity-building, we curate these pages to foreground the vital perspectives of Takiyah Nur Amin, Crystal U. Davis and Nyama McCarthy, Nadine George-Graves, Anusha Kedhar, Nrithya Pillai, and DSA President Melissa Blanco Borelli at this critical historical and political juncture. Kedhar has taken the opportunity to reflect upon the importance of caste justice in bharatanatyam, instead of writing about the dance excerpt which she originally performed as part of the Gatherings. Such powerful and uncompromising offerings to our field are crucial to its reimaginings. We are grateful for the authors' forthright honesty, their incisive words, and their urgent call to expose the injustices in our field. Their contributions will, we hope, reverberate across Dance Studies as we commit to the ongoing labour of (re) making the field towards becoming an equitable space of reflection, research, and action. And perhaps we can do this in a democratic ethos, not by promoting false harmony, or by championing 'diversity' with its unwillingness to decentre power, or indeed by working towards the fantasy of consensus--but instead, through deep listening, and by valuing debate, dissensus, and difference.

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## Notes

1. *The Gatherings proceedings have been lightly edited and updated, where relevant, for publication.*
2. *The Bibliography collects all the references mentioned in this special issue and, we hope, will serve as a useful resource for dance educators.*

# Opening Words

*Takiyah Nur Amin*

*Author's Note: I was invited to write in response to "this moment which calls for us to think deeply about how to navigate the exigencies illuminated by Black Lives Matter protests and address them meaningfully in our field." What follows is a creative rendering of some of my most honest thoughts in response to the request to "foreground insights emerging from current political developments" as a Black dance scholar.*

## Movement I

My people say, sometimes you have to laugh to keep from crying.  
I am sure that wisdom was passed on to me for seasons like this when I am watching:  
the corporate  
the elite  
the moneyed  
the funded  
and the power-full  
fall all over themselves to tell me that my life matters to them.  
That Black Lives Matter to them.  
Well, hell—  
*I knew that already.*  
Anybody can see that our lives matter –  
To the machines,  
Both mechanical and intellectual,  
that can only run on  
the stolen/ mischaracterized/ invisibilized/ caricatured/ devalued  
underpaid/ mislabeled/ misrecognized  
Life  
that you've siphoned from our bodies.  
Our Black Lives have always mattered –  
As grist for your mill,  
As fodder for your insatiable cannibalizing tendencies.  
Truth be told?  
*We have always been the slip in your backbone.*  
But now?  
Our bodies are piled too high to be ignored  
and the smoke in the city is clogging your throat  
And the tears come, this time, without coaxing and manipulation  
and breathless, you ask –  
Me/We/Us  
“what should we do NOW?!?”  
As if we haven't told you/ shown you/ asked you/ begged you  
Since time was time.  
You ask—  
“where do we go from HERE?!?”  
As if we haven't answered in song/ dance/ poem/ prose/ paint.  
You ask –  
As if we just got HERE.  
I want to know  
What took you so long to arrive?

## Movement II

*She asked if I was optimistic. She wanted to know if I felt the “possibility” for real “cross-racial, cross-cultural coalitions in dance” emerging from what she called “political unrest” over the summer. Her eyes glistened with hope and little beads of saliva formed in the corner of her mouth. I watched her eyebrows inch toward her hairline, in anticipation of my affirmative response.*

I inhaled.

*The air between us was charged, tension thicker than thick. I could feel, in the silence, the wanting, the needing, the desperation, to hear my Black voice articulate enthusiastic agreement that THIS TIME would be different and that THIS TIME would shape a lasting equitable peace and that THIS TIME THIS TIME THIS TIME...*

I exhaled. I lowered my head.

*My mouth opened tentatively in the shape of a small “o,” then closed, my lips set in a firm, thin line. Because THIS TIME I didn’t want to assuage her anxiety and THIS TIME I didn’t want to perform blessed assurance and THIS TIME THIS TIME THIS TIME...*

*I craved that thick, tense, sweet silence. I wanted the air between us to sit, low and heavy, spread wide across our conversation like a blanket of rain clouds just before a rumbling storm. I wanted the weight of the moment to push us down into the dank, muggy truth that THIS TIME might not be different and that THIS TIME too many still had no appetite for change and THIS TIME THIS TIME THIS TIME...*

I raised my head and opened my mouth to speak and –

*She was already walking away. In motion to catch the next wave. In pursuit of the new hotness. She moved right along, her journey unfettered by the air between us – the air, still wet and heavy with blood and tears. I noticed her easy movement and skipping feet off to the next best thing. I watched her, getting smaller in the distance as I bit my lip and tasted rage and fear...because THIS TIME was too much like the last time and THIS TIME there was nothing but the heaviness of sky and THIS TIME THIS TIME THIS TIME...*

THIS TIME is too much like the LAST TIME.

Let this be the last time.

## Movement III

There is a remarkably agile, recalcitrant system that has learned with time how to adapt and reconstitute itself in favor of maintaining white supremacist structures and hegemonic cultural norms in dance studies. In too many conversations, dialogues, and webinars, this system, powered most ardently by those it seeks to protect, shapes and re-shapes itself, yielding nothing but its own dead skin.

*Nothing changes because nothing changes.*

Every moment invites us to make liberation, to embody justice. And yet – instead of drinking fully from this fount of possibility, from accepting this invitation for change, what follows is a nibbling around the edges. YES to changing the name of a course but NO to challenging its content. YES to acknowledging the work of Black scholars but NO to centering their ideas as foundational, critical and essential in dance studies. YES to learning from Black dance educators but NO to engaging them as trailblazers in shaping pedagogy. YES to considering how our aesthetics have shaped the field but NO to acknowledging how the field has profited from them. YES to creating pipelines for Black students but NO to pathways that would allow access to equitable creative resources within our programs. For every yes, a resounding no.

*We sit in a kind of changing same.*

Dishonesty abounds about what this means in dance studies. Prizes are awarded, jobs are filled, graduate students are admitted, undergraduates present their work, pieces are commissioned, seasons are booked, and the discipline churns on, smug about *what dance means* and *what it has accomplished in the world*. Like the complacent, puffed-up parents of an underperforming honors student, too many folks in dance studies happily ignore how this system maintains, encourages and lifts up mediocrity. When a system is shaped to fundamentally reward and support some of us at the expense of all of us, that system is inequitable. And inequitable systems mean, if you are privileged within them, that you don't ever actually have to be great at anything. When the whole damn thing is shifted in your favor, you don't actually have to be excellent or competitive or even really good.

*Systems that privilege whiteness mean that whiteness wins, as long as it shows up and it is breathing.*

I am possessed of a tentative hope: that those among us endowed with privilege in this system of changing sameness will realize how the structures that buoy their artistic/intellectual careers are the same systems that keep them bound to the unremarkable, like *Adromeda Chained to the Rocks*. These folks should be committed to dismantling this life-stealing system for themselves as much as they might for any person they think is requiring their aid in this historic moment. And if I am assured of anything, it is that Black folks, regardless of what anyone else chooses to do, will continue to define and redefine this discipline by virtue of the generative, life-giving, life-sustaining culture that has brought us to this moment, in spite of every conceivable barrier placed against our artistic/intellectual flourishing. Anything else would mean an entire betrayal of ourselves, of our “dancestors,” and of the current iteration of this chapter in the global struggle for Black freedom.

Black Lives Matter. Indeed, they do.

# Black Women Respond to a Double Pandemic: "The Emotional W(ait)eight"

*Crystal U. Davis and Nyama McCarthy-Brown*

The question was posed, how do we two Black women in academia navigate this moment? This polemic moment of political upheaval, this extended period of tragedy, grief, and mourning of so many people and so many things. But, in our response we are perplexed by the question. "When has this not been a component of our existence?", we asked. Sadly, this is what we do—we carry on; we are all too familiar with how to move through relentless and ongoing stress around the identity markers that make us great and also place us at the receiving end of implicit and explicit bias, racial discrimination, and racial trauma. Can we call it what it is? A professional existence within a White supremacy structure and culture. An existence that was marked by race well before the widely-reported murders of 2020: Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd.

Does it feel different than the last time, which was not even a season ago? Yes and no. I (McCarthy-Brown) am heartened to see White folk on my television, standing up against racial injustice in numbers I have never seen before. I enjoyed the sight of White folk doing the labor of addressing racial oppression. But who are these people? I see few of my White students, my White colleagues, or my White family members doing the same. I question their motives at this moment. Will they sustain this fight, this movement? Because I am not performing Blackness, I am Black for life. In essence, no, I still do not feel any safer within the context of my reality.

We are called upon to be supportive to White students and colleagues as we watch students and faculty of Color exhausted, stressed, and traumatized by the systematic gatekeepers that stand at each gate and white picket fence, checking our papers for legitimacy. We, Black women in the academy, are looked to when racial unrest mounts. We are asked to calm the waters, make White students, faculty, and administration feel at ease. How is this a different paradigm than our enslaved ancestors who gave continuous stolen labor? We are asked to give White people the tools to understand race—to understand the system they designed to oppress us. We are expected to support students of Color. Yet, we are not given time to secure our own oxygen. There is a continuously mounting emotional toll. My persistent question in this moment is: Where is the support for tenure-track women of Color who fail to reach all benchmarks to attain tenure? Our loss of research time and self-care, in the name of anti-racism, is in fact racist.

As we sit in this moment feeling a more urgent ask of action by those around us, the sentiment that change must happen now, we are perplexed at this notion of time and the initiation of this request. At what point did it become so urgent? How long have we been talking about these issues?

Scholars have been writing about the Eurocentric structure and focus of dance departments for over fifty years. We have been "talking

the talk” for too long. Joann Kealiinohomoku’s seminal writing, “An Anthropologist Looks At Ballet as a form of Ethnic Dance” was first published in 1970.<sup>1</sup> In 1992, Sarah Hilsendager was quoted at a national dance education conference stating: “The majority of university dance programs emphasize Ballet and Modern genres, which are Eurocentric in both content and teaching approach.”<sup>2</sup> Since Hilsendager made these statements, which were not even a revelation then, we have witnessed and participated in many discussions, conferences, and auditions, and written and presented at length on the topic, and yet--here we are, with the questions that remains unanswered: How do we place our physical bodies into circumstances of doing, of action instead of intent and talk? How do we create a new world in our academic programs in the way we create new worlds in performance? How do we shift from the somatic phrasing of intent into movement, into actualization instead of display, into the doing of the work? How do we sustain this urgency, this call to action?

It is not lost on us that this moment has developed in the midst of the COVID pandemic slowing down and clearing so much from the slate. Dance spaces, performance venues, institutional travel plans, and annual conferences have shifted to a physically distant online formats, if not cancelled entirely. We cannot stop asking if halting our daily routine, our enrichment, and extracurricular activities is the sustenance needed for society to take the time to *feel something* for one another, to momentarily disrupt the racial empathy gap. Our usual experience of time, the feel of our daily routine, and initiation, the impulse to begin something new, has shifted in this new COVID pandemic world. The way in which we have been navigating and perceiving the world has contorted from a normative business as usual to a disruptive pattern of uncertainty, physical disconnection from each other, and inundation with digital content and interfaces. This level of global disruption of the norm has the potential to reorganize the norm, but only with critical, interrelational engagement with the norms that existed before the COVID pandemic.

Competitive notions of whiteness have been disrupted by a collective global crisis halting entire economies, our health, and human interactions. Work in the area of implicit cognition asserts the framework of competition feeds social dominance orientation, the sentiment of “us against them.”<sup>3</sup> This area of research also tells us that the brain is malleable, that plasticity affords the opportunity to suppress this “us against them” perspective when groups of people organize around a

task, a goal, or a passion.<sup>4</sup> Admittedly, the fear of uncertainty increased the pull toward competitive thinking, of a rage that “the Other” is getting more than I am. But for many, this current moment has stripped away notions of difference as we live through this viral pandemic. While the whole world may not be having an identical experience, the world is grappling with the massive changes in normative behaviors and longstanding systems that the viral pandemic has brought about. We know there are White people feeling this urgency to learn, see, and change the things that there was not *time* taken to comprehend before. When looking back at why there is still the need for an urgent push to force the issue of racial inequity hundreds of years later after the emergence of this settler-colonial country, the root of the question is how do we as a field mature from performative, symbolic displays of an intolerance for injustice into a place of sustained, responsible, actionable change? How does the field of dance move past Ahmed’s performative “naming” of the injustice and shift to an actionable method to usurp it in physical, embodied, realization?<sup>5</sup>

In our research about biases, much of the attention has been focused on the operation and effects of implicit biases in decision making, behaviors, and attitudes towards others. We ask that a lower bar be considered, one of being able to name our explicit biases. The attitudes that, when pressed, one can assert as a central belief, perspective, or foundational reasoning behind decisions, behaviors, and sentiments towards others. Can you simply speak the truth of where your values lay as a starting point? Can you say out loud realities that are operational like, “I value my livelihood and place at the table more than I do the full and equitable representation of BIPOC dancers as equitable partners in the field.” Are you able to state plainly, “I am not willing to give up the power, status, or image as an expert in the field of dance, because I value my position more than I value a more diverse, fuller representation of the artists working in the field of dance.”

This is a time and a moment that we should move past performative gestures into deep, specific and practical visioning and then take the plans through the process of creative realization. This involves the very thing skills of creative realization have provided in the field of dance. For those who know and have moved through the creative process of envisioning or becoming curious about an idea, exploring methods of embodiment and expression, and creating a world for audiences to experience around that initial vision and exploration, we implore you to do this for racial injustice. List out your priorities and bring together

accountability partners that help deepen your understanding of how your words do or do not align with your actions--partners who can call you on instances of equivocation that avoid taking action. Be messy, be vulnerable, be forward-leaning in moving through emotions that inhibit actionable disruption of racially unjust hegemonic structures.

If you are unable to prioritize dance genres and subjects outside your own affinity or are uninterested in the labor of equity for other cultures, forms, and peoples, how can you leverage your resources to make space for others? It may be the case that your program does not have the space, faculty, or student population interest to support dance studies in genres outside the dominant culture and Western canon. Are you investing in BIPOC dance companies, institutes, or artists in other areas?

It is of great significance that one might look to women of Color in this moment involving the double pandemic of racism and a health crisis. Indeed those who have been expunged from multiple forms of equality are often the most perspicacious truth-tellers. For some, we are in this particular Black Lives Matter moment after the gruesome and internationally witnessed death of George Floyd. Yet for many, this is not a new moment. Simply put, if you do not know the stories of Black women, it is because you have not been listening, reading, watching, or witnessing.

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## Notes

1. Kealiinohomoku, Joann. "An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance," *Impulse* 20 (1970): 24-33.
2. Judith Hanna, ed.. *Partnering Dance and Education: Intelligent Moves for Changing Times* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1999), 79.
3. Sa-kiera Tiarra Jolynn Hudson, Mina Cikara, and Jim Sidanius, "Preference for hierarchy is associated with reduced empathy and increased counter-empathy towards others, especially out-group targets," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 85 (2019): 103871. See also Ryan Perry, Chris G. Sibley, and John Duckitt, "Dangerous and competitive worldviews: A meta-analysis of their associations with social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism," *Journal of Research in Personality* vol. 47, no. 1 (2013): 116-127.

4. Eberhardt, Jennifer L. *Biased: Uncovering the hidden prejudice that shapes what we see, think, and do*. Penguin Books, 2020.
5. Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

# The Politics of Naming the South Indian Dancer

*Nrithya Pillai*

The hereditary South Indian dancer is often named as “devadasi.” The popular understanding of this term is as follows: “Devadasis” existed all across India since time immemorial. In South India, they were linked to Hindu temples and often called “temple dancers,” and in North India, because of Islamic influence, they were called “*tawaifs*,” or courtesans.<sup>1</sup>

Here’s what is problematic about this narrative as we reflect on the erasure of the hereditary performers’ contribution, in terms of art and the aesthetics, from what is today re-invented and re-imagined as bharatanatyam, a South Indian dance. First, “devadasi,” as many scholars have shown, is a word that comes out of Sanskrit materials that were the focus of European Orientalist scholarship about India. It is not a term used frequently in the historical record (texts, inscriptions, literature, etc.), and more importantly, within these communities that held exclusive rights to performative traditions that were part of their intangible culture.<sup>2</sup> The label “devadasi” was given a new visibility during the reform debates that began in the late 19th century about 150 years ago, in which a whole range of South Indian women’s communities--from the *Bahujan melakkarakar* in Tamil Nadu and kalavantula in Andhra Pradesh, *Dalit jogati* and *matamma* communities in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh<sup>3</sup>--were all lumped together for the purpose of passing legislation that would supposedly curb sex work and ultimately better the lives of these women.

It is important to note here that the women belonging to the hereditary courtesan castes and their lifestyles couldn’t be equated to prostitution or even sex work for that matter; it would be very wrong to do so if it were to happen today. This was a socially sanctioned practice of that time, with most women having longstanding non-conjugal relationships with their patron. While it had its own set of problems, it is reductionist to simply equate these women to being prostitutes. It is also important to consider the ongoing debates about sex work being the preferred term as opposed to the word “prostitute.”

Nevertheless, reform movements sought to curtail and end hereditary courtesan practices by framing them as sexually immoral and degraded traditions, culminating with the passage of laws in 1947 that criminalized them--laws which persist to this day. The solution given to the “non-conjugal” relationships in these courtesan castes was marriage, since in its patriarchal and oppressive form, it was deemed the respectable way out for women artists. Importantly, reform at that point did not problematize the transactional nature of institutionalized caste-endogamous marriages that were normative during that period in all castes, including brahmin castes. Not only did reform exacerbate extant problems around stigma and suspicion of women artists, it also marked the category “devadasi” with a new kind of negative publicity.

To escape these new forms of stigma, men in these communities formed caste associations in which they styled themselves using novel caste titles such as “Isai Vellalar” and “Surya Baliya,” which clearly marked them as Bahujan or in their reckoning, “middle-jati” (middle caste) Sudra groups; Vellalar and Baliya are both traditionally cultivator communities.<sup>4</sup> Men in these communities were from a formerly matrifocal context where they played second fiddle, being orchestra members or teachers to the women--the lead performers who often carried the show, where women held a certain access to wealth and status. In fact the melam (dance troupes) were named after the female lead performer. The men from the present Isai Vellalar castes at the peak of the reform were either not at all involved in the arts and therefore had no stakes at the loss of the art form from their hands, or they were artistes who styled themselves as gurus and teachers to upper-caste women who became their new patrons. We must understand the psychological need to have patriarchal norms that would establish their own access to wealth, status, respect and control over women’s sexuality that drove this refashioning, but this in itself was the notion of RESPECTABILITY that was put forth by REFORM.

For men, this coding worked well. It inserted them into the new social and political order of modern India. But for women, this coding was simply a euphemism: everyone still knows what is meant when we say “Isai Vellalar girl.” The association with the performance traditions in the community continues to add to existing stigma and therefore there is a natural tendency for female artists to disassociate from their cultural histories and practices. I hope that it is clear why it is problematic for women in the community to be referred to as “devadasi,” or the community as a whole being referred to as devadasi or dasi community.

Despite this, many upper-caste brahmin women and white women want to use the term “devadasi” or claim to do devadasi dance while they continue to romanticize this practice and its repercussions for women within courtesan castes. Some such women even put up pictures and videos of their staged *bottukattudhal*,<sup>5</sup> or other bygone initiation rituals indicating their adoption of devadasi practice, and some want to dress up and perform as a devadasi, the phenomenon of “devadasi-face.” This is possible because only they can claim to be a devadasi, without having to face any repercussions.

Let us come to the present day scenario: there are very few young women from my Isai Vellalar caste location who are dancing

BHARATANATYAM, and none of them identify or can be identified with “that term.” The reform to abolish the practice that also criminalized my foremothers happened nearly a hundred years ago. Of course there were older women who inherited the term “devadasi,” even from the time of the debates regarding reform about one hundred and fifty years ago. At that time women from these castes mobilised together and had to take on legal battles in order to represent themselves through the term devadasi and fight against impending criminalization. They continued to use it thereafter and very few women of that generation are still alive today. But the term is now irrelevant, triggering, and creates acute intergenerational trauma in young women like me from these courtesan communities with performance traditions.

The usage of the term and narrative by upper castes and Orientalists with respect to courtesan castes like mine inflicts violence and dissuades women from engaging in both their hereditary dance form and its critical history.

This is a significant intervention from me as an Isai Vellalar woman. I have been pointing out the instability of the term “devadasi.” I have said time and time again that the use of this term is problematic, and yet, there is a Brahmin lobby within the dance world that seems to keep insisting that we uphold this term in public discourse. Their justification rests either on arguments about “indigeneity” – for devadasi is, after all, a Sanskrit term, nevermind that it was hardly ever used in the historical record before European colonialism – OR it rests on the fact that a certain generation of rural women use this term as an inheritance of the social reform movement, much in the same way that they would tell you that ritual practice of *bottukattudhal* was a good thing of the past. My decision, as someone of a different generation and social location, to identify with the English terms “hereditary dancing caste” or “courtesan” in order to build solidarities with young women from similar Bahujan communities across India (such as tawaif or kolhati communities) is critiqued by the upper-caste gatekeepers as “foreign,” a term that has “different cultural connotations.” Such gatekeepers want to keep this identity trapped in the cage of the “archaic,” so that they may emerge as the legitimate, modern face of both devadasi dance and discourse.

It is important that any practitioner or scholar of bharatanatyam understands the problematic nature of the discourse, when they don't question the inherent casteist violence inflicted and gatekeeping perpetuated by this “critical dance history” narrative, driven by brahmin

hegemony. The question that should drive this is: "Which young woman from these castes wants to intentionally re-inscribe stigma-laden names like 'devadasi' onto herself, and for whose benefit?"

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## Notes

1. *Tawaif* is the Urdu word for professional female entertainers versed in dance, music, and the literary arts. The tawaif tradition was established in north Indian courts and salons.
2. See, for instance, Leslie Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval Tamilnadu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
3. The Hindu caste hierarchy in India, and in manifestations in the diaspora, identifies four groups: brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya, and sudra. Bahujan is a term that refers to the caste-oppressed communities who make up the majority of society, including sudras and Dalits. Dalit ("the oppressed ones") is a term for those who exist outside of the formal caste hierarchy as the avarnas or the unclassified, formerly known as "untouchables." The term Dalit has been chosen for purposes of self-representation and political organizing. It sometimes strategically includes reference to Bahujan communities, and is sometimes used distinctively. Jati is another word for caste.
4. This process of renaming began in the 1940s in the context of the Dravidian self-respect movement. See Janet O'Shea, *At Home in the World: Bharata Natyam on the Global Stage* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007).
5. The ritual practice of tying the *bottu*, the ornament used to mark the woman as a courtesan.
6. These are courtesan castes from other geographic locations within India.

# It is Time for a Caste Reckoning in Indian "Classical" Dance

*Anusha Kedhar*

On September 14, 2020, a 19-year old Dalit woman was raped and brutalized by four dominant-caste (Thakur) men in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh.<sup>1</sup> She died two weeks later from injuries sustained during the attack but not before naming her rapists. In an effort, presumably, to erase any physical evidence of the assault, the police cremated her body, denying the family the dignity of performing the last rites for their daughter and sister.<sup>2</sup>

There are many in India, including *savarna*<sup>3</sup> feminists, who argued that the Hathras case was not a caste-based crime, that it shouldn't be reduced to caste, and, moreover, that by insisting on foregrounding caste, Dalit feminist activists were being divisive.<sup>4</sup> Crimes against Dalits are often attributed to class status, poverty, or education – rarely to caste.

Caste denial is another form of caste violence.

Violence against Dalit women is not exceptional. According to India's National Crime Records Bureau, four Dalit women are raped, two Dalits are murdered, and two Dalit homes are torched every day.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, caste is not incidental to that violence; "caste is the framework within which sexuality operates in South Asia."<sup>6</sup> Gender-based violence against Dalit women is enshrined in Brahminical patriarchy, which is built on notions of purity and pollution that dehumanize Dalit communities and

justify violence against them. Rape functions as a form of caste terror, a warning to Dalit communities to stay in their place and not cross caste lines. Caste, in other words, is enforced through violence against Dalit women's bodies.<sup>7</sup>

The Indian "classical" dance world is not immune from casteism. But it has been remarkably silent on the way caste pervades and shapes it. The denial of caste in the Hathras case extends to other parts of Indian society and culture, including dance. **It is time for a caste reckoning in the *savarna*-dominated world of Indian "classical" dance.** The following remarks are addressed to my fellow *savarna* dancers and dance scholars.

The seizure of hereditary dance practices by dominant-caste elites in the 20th century is, by now, a well-established and well-circulated history within academic circles.<sup>8</sup> Yet, this history is still, at times, contested, dismissed as irrelevant, or ignored altogether. Moreover, it is rarely part of dancers' training. For many practitioners, the figure of the hereditary dancer is a relic of the past, relegated to the dustbin of history. But the question of caste in Indian "classical" dance is not just an historical question; it is an ongoing one that we must continue to reckon and wrestle with. We cannot consign caste to the past when it continues to impact its contemporary practice both in India and the diaspora.

Addressing Indian "classical" dance's casteism is not just about knowing its histories of appropriation, but about undoing the mechanisms and structures that are a legacy of those histories. In the same way that a racial reckoning in the US requires white and non-Black people to acknowledge how they have historically perpetuated and benefited from -- *and continue to perpetuate and benefit from* -- anti-Black and white supremacist ideologies, policies, structures, and institutions, a caste reckoning requires *savarna* dancers to acknowledge the ways they have historically perpetuated and benefited from -- *and continue to perpetuate and benefit from* -- casteist ideologies, policies, structures, and institutions.

I am a bharata natyam dancer from a Tamil Brahmin family. I trace my dance lineage to Swamimalai K. Rajaratnam Pillai from the *isai vellalar* community of hereditary artists. I have made a career out of being a bharata natyam dancer and now scholar of Indian dance. Bharata natyam has constituted my livelihood, garnered me recognition, and brought me social, cultural, and economic capital.

What is my responsibility to hereditary dance communities as a *savarna* woman who has benefited from a form that was seized by my ancestral community? Moreover, how do *savarna* dancers, like myself, reproduce caste violence through our bodies? What casteist aesthetics do we perpetuate in how we teach and what we perform? What caste violence do our dancing bodies enact when we ascend the stage? And what might caste justice look like once we reckon with the Brahminical supremacy of multiple forms of Indian "classical" dance? Since I am most familiar with bharata natyam, I will focus the rest of my remarks on this specific Indian dance form.

The reinvention of bharata natyam in the 20th century was a casteist project. It was based on the exclusion and erasure of hereditary dancing women and the extraction of their dance forms from their bodies. Only after hereditary dancers were removed could Brahmin women take their place as surrogates and, eventually, knowledge-bearers of the art form. As Nrithya Pillai, a bharata natyam dancer from the *isai vellalar* community, noted recently, Brahmin access to the form was predicated on the denial of access to hereditary dancers.<sup>9</sup> The canonization of bharata natyam as "classical" was also part of this deliberate project to detach bharata natyam from its origins in hereditary dance communities so it could be situated within an ancient past and given a national and global future.

Caste exclusion is not just about which bodies are allowed to inhabit the form; it's also about aesthetics and questions of "taste." Aesthetics are not neutral or universal; they are political and instantiate hierarchies that can intersect with and reinforce social hierarchies of class and caste. What constitutes "good" versus "bad" dancing, what is deemed "elegant" as opposed to "vulgar," what is seen as "tasteful" rather than "gaudy" has been shaped by Brahmin aesthetic values.

These aesthetic values inform aesthetic representations. We need to think critically about the stories and myths we choose to tell and re-tell -- and *how* we tell them. How do performances of seemingly progressive stories about caste discrimination, such as the story of Nandanar, absolve us of our responsibility to annihilate caste by teaching us that the only way to undo caste is through divine intervention?<sup>10</sup> How might our interpretations actually reinscribe caste hierarchies?<sup>11</sup> What is our relationship to erotically charged *padams* and *javalis*?<sup>12</sup> Do we deem these pieces "vulgar," dilute or censor their erotic content, or do we romanticize their performance as transgressive and liberatory but only when done "tastefully"? When we perform stories from the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*, do we consider the ways in which they reify notions of *dharma* that have been used to justify caste hierarchies? How does caste inform how we perform ideal femininity and masculinity, beauty and the grotesque, archetypal figures and *rakshasas* (demons)?

Brahminical supremacy in bharata natyam extends beyond the dance form to the entire dance ecology. From *sabhas* to critics to teachers to audiences, the Brahmin community continues its stranglehold on the form as arbiters of taste. Today, there is a notable absence of bharata natyam dancers from caste-oppressed and hereditary dance communities. This may be due in part to residual stigma and fear on the part of dancers from these communities to expose their caste identity. But it is, undeniably, also because of Brahmin gatekeeping that denies entry to caste-oppressed dancers in both explicit and implicit ways, including gaslighting and silencing. When hereditary dancers have spoken out about their experiences of exclusion, their voices are dismissed for being "too angry" or engaging in "reductive" identity politics. When they demand to be listened to rather than spoken for, they are met with hostility and defensiveness from the very people who claim to be allies. "We would rather look at sculptured female bodies in temples built 1,000 years ago than listen to the women very much present today."<sup>13</sup>

So, what might caste justice look like in Indian "classical" dance? How might we take up B.R. Ambedkar's call and annihilate caste in Indian "classical" dance?<sup>14</sup> How might *savarna* dancers be allies and accomplices in the fight for caste abolition? First and foremost, we must listen to, not speak for, dancers from hereditary dance communities. We must uplift and amplify their voices. We must also do the hard work to educate ourselves about the complex and vexed histories of our forms. We need to stop perpetuating the rescue narrative that positions Brahmins as saviors of a "dying" art form and talk openly about appropriation, not revival or reformation.<sup>15</sup> We need to acknowledge our inherent caste privilege and understand how we've benefited from it; only then can we leverage that privilege to end the silence on casteism and eventually dismantle it. This means enacting "caste betrayal" by calling out Brahmin fragility and calling in our fellow *savarna* dancers.<sup>16</sup> It means honoring and naming the original culture-bearers of the form, on their terms, as they wish to be named, when we teach and perform. It means increasing the representation of dancers from hereditary and caste-oppressed communities while also understanding the reasons many might choose not to dance. It means interrogating our choreographic and representational practices and questioning our aesthetic tastes. It means examining who controls the means of production, noticing whose voices and bodies are privileged, and reallocating resources and capital to address caste and class inequities. It also means having a serious conversation about reparations and how to address the enduring social and economic consequences of cultural appropriation on hereditary dance communities. We must ask ourselves: What are we willing to give up? What resources and privileges are we willing to sacrifice? And, what artistic and intellectual territory--that we have occupied for far too long--are we willing to cede? Cornel West, a long-time advocate of Dalit rights and caste abolition, argues we need to see the world through the lens of the most oppressed in order to transform it. This is my call to action to all *savarna* dancers and dance scholars, including me.

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### Acknowledgements

I want to acknowledge the many Dalit and caste-oppressed activists and feminists who have been leading the fight for caste abolition. I have learned so much from them. Special thanks to the Unlearning Caste Supremacy training organized by Equality Labs (<https://www.equalitylabs.org/>) and Thenmozhi Soundarajan for her tireless work.

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### Notes

1. "Hathras Gangrape: 19-Year-Old Dalit Woman Dies in Delhi Hospital," *The Wire*, September 29, 2020. <https://thewire.in/women/hathras-gangrape-dalit-woman-dies>. Dalits (officially called Scheduled Caste by the Indian government) are oppressed castes in the Indian caste system.
2. "Hathras gang rape: India victim cremated 'without family's consent'," *BBC*, September 30, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54351744>
3. The term *savarna* refers to those with caste privilege, which includes the top three castes in the Indian caste system--Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya. Sudras are the fourth caste, and are often grouped with Dalits as Bahujans, meaning "the many."
4. Nikhila Henry, "Caste-Ignorant People Speak For Dalit Women In India: Academic Rekha Raj," *Huffington Post* (India), October 8, 2020, [https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/hathras-dalit-atrocities-privilege-rekha-raj-interview\\_in\\_5f7dd671c5b63de65f08b307?ncid=yhpf](https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/hathras-dalit-atrocities-privilege-rekha-raj-interview_in_5f7dd671c5b63de65f08b307?ncid=yhpf); "The Horror Visited Upon The Hathras Rape Victim Is As Much A Casteist Issue As It Is About Gendered Violence," *womensweb.in*, September 30, 2020, <https://www.womensweb.in/2020/09/hathras-rape-victim-caste-based-violence-gendered-violence-oct20wk1sr/>
5. Thenmozhi Soundarajan, "India's Caste Culture is a Rape Culture," *kractivist.org*, June 9, 2014. <https://kractivist.org/indias-caste-culture-is-a-rape-culture-vaw/>. These statistics are from 2014. Since then, there has been a notable increase in crimes against Dalits, especially Dalit women.
6. Dhruvo Jyoti, "Interview: Dhruvo Jyoti," interview with Shikha Aleya, *In Plainspeak*, *tarshi.net*, October 16, 2017. <https://www.tarshi.net/inplainspeak/interview-dhruvo-jyoti/>
7. Soundarajan 2014.
8. See, for example, Janet O'Shea's *At Home in the World: Bharata Natyam on the Global Stage* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007); Pallabi Chakravorty's *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women, and Modernity in India* (Chicago: Seagull Books, 2008);

and Davesh Soneji's *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory and Modernity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Nriithya Pillai, "De-colonizing Bharata Natyam and Embodying Erasure," talk at Marymount Manhattan College, New York City, USA, October 16, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> According to legend, a Dalit man named Nandanar went to pray at a Siva temple in his village, but was prevented from entering because of his caste. Undeterred, he sat outside singing songs in praise of Siva. Upon hearing his prayers, Nandi, the stone bull that sits in front of the deity, moved so Nandanar could view Siva clearly. This story is a popular item in the bharata natyam repertoire.

<sup>11</sup> Bharata natyam dancers often reproduce caste hierarchies through common gestural representations of Nandanar, such as adopting hunched shoulders and a bent-over stance (Preethi Ramaprasad, "Nandanar: Visibilizing Caste in Bharatanatyam," talk at 2020 Center for Ideas and Society Virtual Research Conference, University of California, Riverside, USA, April 30, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> In the bharata natyam repertoire, *padams* and *javalis* are love songs, often erotic in content, that describe the courtesan's desire for her beloved (who may take the form of a god, a king, or a patron). Following the Brahminization of bharata natyam, these items were rarely performed by dominant caste dancers due to their overt eroticism and explicit associations with the non-conjugal sexual life of the courtesan.

<sup>13</sup> Rituparna Pal, "It is High Time Savarna Indians Confronted Their Role as Conspirators in Perpetuating Casteism, Brahminical Patriarchy," *Firstpost.com*, October 15, 2020. <https://www.firstpost.com/art-and-culture/it-is-high-time-savarna-indians-confronted-their-role-as-conspirators-in-perpetuating-casteism-brahminical-patriarchy-8911811.html>

<sup>14</sup> B.R. Ambedkar was an Indian social reformer who campaigned for Dalit rights. He published *The Annihilation of Caste* in 1936 (London: Verso, [1936] 2014) and was also the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, which included outlawing discrimination against Dalits. While his relationship to dance is vexed (he supported legislation that banned hereditary dancers from performing), his call to annihilate caste is still important and relevant.

<sup>15</sup> Sammitha Sreevathsa, "Classical Dance and Appropriation: How to Think about a Field Whose Foundations Rest on Cultural Violence," *Firstpost.com*, December 1, 2019. <https://www.firstpost.com/living/classical-dance-and-appropriation-how-to-think-about-a-field-whose-foundations-rest-on-cultural-violence-7708381.html>

<sup>16</sup> I thank Kareem Khubchandani for suggesting the language of "betrayal."

# Discussing the Undiscussable, Part 2; or, This Might Hurt Your Feelings\*

*Nadine George-Graves*

Columbus, OH and Brooklyn, NY  
September 28, 2020

It is always an honor to be asked to contribute to a conversation, especially on a topic as important as DSA's call to action against global anti-Blackness and white supremacy.

So, I wrote a piece that was frank, from my heart, and not a little scathing. I took the charge at its word and called out the field, challenging us with the truth as I see it—the things I only tell my husband.

It was tough love but maybe we are ready, I thought.

Then I slept on it and decided not to “press send” because I know the field doesn't actually want to know what I think.

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## Notes

\* The title is a wink and a nod to Arlene Croce's non-review of Bill T. Jones' *Still/Here* in the *New Yorker*, December 26, 1994, p. 54.

We *can* discuss and review works like *Still/Here* by Bill T. Jones or *Duet* by Paul Taylor. But we cannot manage an actual conversation across the field about racism in Dance Studies.

I hope this silence speaks volumes and I'll read you the essay at my retirement party.

Instead, I've asked the editors to hold space on the page for the ways in which we cannot hold space as a community.

NGG

## Introductory Remarks

*Anurima Banerji and Royona Mitra*

Anurima Banerji [AB]: “Decolonizing Dance Discourses” offers two curated, self-contained but thematically linked Gatherings, connected by their shared effort to interrogate key terms that dance studies, in its universalizing, Eurocentric, and English-language modes, takes for granted, from different and competing cultural perspectives. While the first Gathering [on August 9, 2019] examines “Dance” and “Choreography,” the second [on August 10, 2019] addresses “Technique” and “Training.”

Our intent is for these collective transcultural exchanges to unravel and unsettle hegemonic terminologies in dance studies. The participants will examine the diverse meanings and aesthetic genealogies of dance discourses across various genres and geographies. Our endeavor is for these sharings to address productive commonalities and meaningful divergences in our collective interpretations. The contributions attend to philosophical as well pragmatic considerations involved in making decolonizing interventions in research, pedagogy, and creative practice. While we acknowledge that dance studies scholars have already critically mapped and engaged with these dance terms, what we are looking to achieve through these Gatherings is to expand these discourses, and work towards developing interconnected lexicons and knowledge systems in the field.

Royona Mitra [RM]: In our collective bid to challenge received knowledge-systems and discourses that have been foundational to dance studies, we look to anti-colonial and anti-racist critical theories. We are conjuring the term “decolonizing” in our title in all its complexities and iridescence, recognizing that this political act refers to the disruption of a range of normative social hierarchies. We are conscious here to differentiate between “decolonizing” as a material act, and the “decolonial” as an undoing of imperialist epistemes. We respond to the critiques posed by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” where they caution against the metaphoric use of the verb “decolonize” or noun “decolonization” as, they claim, it tempers the movement’s political roots in indigenous people’s rights, reparations and land reclaims.<sup>1</sup> We answer Walter D. Mignolo’s call for decoloniality, the undoing of “epistemicides” that has perpetuated US and Eurocentric knowledge systems as norm.<sup>2</sup> We are inspired by Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ concept of the “Epistemologies of the South” as a collective, coalitional, resistive, anti-colonial and anti-capitalist alternative to US and Eurocentric systems that control who, how and what is perpetuated as knowledge and knowledge-making.<sup>3</sup> Santos argues that *Epistemologies of the South* wishes to promote an “ecology of knowledges and intercultural translation,” a pluriverse of different ways of knowing and being that are in conversation with

each other.<sup>4</sup> He reminds us that for this pluriverse to function on equal and just terms, knowledge needs to be decolonized, not just for the colonized, but also for the colonizers. We further embrace Mignolo's case for "epistemic disobedience," to expose the inherent structural racism that permeates the geopolitics of knowledge, and ultimately our academy.<sup>5</sup>

AB: The Gatherings build on the ongoing decolonizing work of our predecessors and peers, and are especially mindful of the interventions by Takiyah Nur Amin, Ananya Chatterjea, Thomas DeFrantz, Susan Foster, Jens Giersdorf, Crystal U. Davis, Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, Nadine George-Graves, SanSan Kwan, Nyama McCarthy-Brown, Karen Recollet, Marta Savigliano, Jacqueline Shea Murphy, Priya Srinivasan, Yutian Wong...and many others in arguing for an expanded consideration of the politics of difference in dance studies.<sup>6</sup> The speakers' contributions here serve as gestures against universalism, against the quick assumption of the conceptual and empirical autonomy that governs dominant discourse about "dance" and "choreography" and "technique and training." Provincializing these terms—locating them as they are theorized, understood and embedded in myriad contexts and practices—works both against the tendency to view them as self-evident, coherent, and comfortably settled categories, capable of accounting for the varied conceptualizations of "dance," "choreography," "technique," and "training" that abound globally. These acts of particularization, moreover, work in tandem with the logic of undoing what Julietta Singh calls "the abiding and proliferating force of mastery" exerted over these terms as a general principle in our field of study.<sup>7</sup> As Singh argues, "there is an intimate link between the mastery enacted through colonization, and other forms of mastery that we often believe today to be harmless, worthwhile, even virtuous. To be characterized as the master of a language, or a literary tradition, or an instrument" -- and we might add here, dance -- "is widely understood to be laudable. Yet as a pursuit, mastery invariably and relentlessly reaches toward the indiscriminate control over something--whether human or inhuman, animate or inanimate. It aims for the full submission of an object--or something *objectified*--whether it be external or internal to oneself. [...] Mastery is in this sense a splitting of the object that is mastered from itself, a way of estranging the mastered object from its previous state of being." Crucially, the process also "involves the denial of the master's own dependency on other bodies."<sup>8</sup>

RM & AB (*in unison*): This is an argument we can productively engage

in our field as we imagine decolonial maneuvers: for the stability, generalization, and dispersal of "dance," "choreography," "technique," and "training" as common terms cannot take place without valorizing our alleged mastery over *other* forms, other aesthetic frames, other epistemes, other genres, other bodies, that we may not know intimately, or at all. We want to acknowledge then that this discussion, despite the diversity of our individual backgrounds, are all between scholars situated in the US and the UK, and not reflective of the robust dance studies discourses anchored in the global South. We frame our Gatherings, then, as experiments in giving up the fantasy of mastery, and aiming instead to learn from each other through mutual exchange, debate, and engagement from our specific vantage points.

We want to end with the words of Achille Mbembe: "The celebration of difference will be meaningful only if it opens onto the fundamental question [...] of sharing, of the common, of the expansion of horizon."<sup>9</sup>

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## Notes

1. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," in *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* vol. 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-40.
2. Walter Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option: A Manifesto," in *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* vol. 1, issue 2 (2011): 44-66.
3. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2017).
4. de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 32.
5. Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option: A Manifesto."
6. Ananya Chatterjea, *Butting Out: Reading Resistive Choreographies through the Work of Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Chandralekha* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004); "On the Value of Mistranslations and Contaminations: The Category of 'Contemporary Choreography' in Asian Dance," *Dance Research Journal* vol. 45, no. 1 (2013): 7-21; Thomas F. DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 2006); Thomas F. DeFrantz, and Anita Gonzalez, *Black Performance Theory* (Duke University Press, 2014); Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Susan Leigh Foster, ed., *Worlding Dance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (London: Routledge, 2011); Nadine George-Graves, *Urban Bush Women: Twenty Years of African American Dance Theatre, Community Engagement, and Working it Out* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010); Jens Richard Giersdorf, "Dance Studies in the International Academy: Genealogy of a Disciplinary Formation," in *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader* 3rd. ed., eds. Jens Giersdorf and Yutian Wong (London: Routledge, 2018), 429-444; SanSan Kwan, "When Is Contemporary Dance?" *Dance Research Journal* vol. 49, no. 3 (2017): 38–52; Karyn Recollet, "Glyphing Decolonial Love Through Urban Flash Mobbing and Walking with our Sisters," *Curriculum Inquiry* vol. 45, no. 1 (2015): 129-145; Marta Savigliano, *Tango And The Political Economy Of Passion*, (Nashville: Westview Publishing, 1995); Jacqueline Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012); Yutian Wong, *Choreographing Asian America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010).

7. Julietta Singh, *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 3.
8. Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*, 10.
9. Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 177.

## Black Laws of Dance

*Jasmine Johnson*

I am grateful for the powerful framework of these Gatherings to ground our critical conjuring. I'm also grateful for my fellow Gatherers, and for the opportunity to learn from you all.

When I first mapped out this talk, I set out to share meditations on a current research project that sets its vision on Virginian and South Carolinian slave codes<sup>1</sup> (belonging to the years 1705 and 1740, respectively) in order to chart how dance specifically, and movement more broadly, emerged in early North American slave code legislation.

This year, I have had the great fortune of being a Scholar-in-Residence at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture—the historic Black Studies wing of the New York Public Library. There I set out to embark on a project, one that will be hard for me to not always feel at the beginning of: a material history of Black American dance. After explaining my ambitions for the work to one colleague, she shared that “that” book had already been written. Twice. Having confidence in my personal and citational gratitude for the Black dance scholarship upon which my work depends, and open to new citations, I asked her simply: “which books am I repeating?” She evoked Jacqui Malone’s *Steppin’ on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* (1996) and Lynne Fauley Emery’s *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today* (1988).<sup>2</sup> These two authors are crucial. And — alongside a sea of others (I’m

thinking here of Katherine Dunham, Katrina Hazzard Donald, John Perpener, Edward Thorpe, Richard Long, Marshall and Jean Sterns and so many others) — are valued scholars that have, in their own unique ways, explored rich Black American dance histories.

The project that currently drums me does not emerge from a desire to retread these texts. It is not rooted in a stingy, near-sighted drive to discover what no other person has before. Nor is it about taking a magnifying glass to previous works with the intention of pointing out what they might not have said. Rather, I have become increasingly obsessed with our basic, foundational terms; and I am going back to primary sources (to a time where the “Black” in “Black dance” historically congealed) to listen to the hum of contradiction and contestation.

*I am interested in Black people’s ambiguity and skepticism around “dance” not to marginalize important histories of Black resistance, but to pull some threads to trouble narratives of Black dance that are organized by logics of protest, retentions, defiance, and presumptions of will (by which I mean a premise that Black people always *want* to dance when they are “dancing”).*

I wonder how the ontology of blackness troubles the category and meaning of dance. How an attention to Black subjection might put

pressure on, if not explode, the meanings we imbue into the word “dance.” In other words, “dance” has different, competing, and contested valuations when used to describe Black movement. From the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade in the 15th century, through what Rinaldo Walcott has described as a “long emancipation,”<sup>3</sup> to our present condition of being inside what Christina Sharpe theorizes as “the wake”—a condition shaped by “living the history and present of terror [...] as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies while even as that terror is visited on our bodies the realities of that terror are erased.”<sup>4</sup> Throughout this long and barbed history, “dance” has actually been a tactic of subjection, and source of deep ambivalence on behalf of the Black “dancer.”

In Black Studies, the narrative that African dance and drum were banned during the legal institution of slavery is common. Following this logic, it is through the impermissibility of indigenous African dance practice (an impermissibility expressed through extralegal violence and slave codes) that Black American dance innovations cropped. In steeping in archives — something I admit I was afraid of because (as an ethnographer comfortable with talking to living people) I imagined this archive to be quiet; not soundless but hushed, not closed but standoffish — what I encountered was noisiness. It took a different kind of listening for me to hear and what I received was this: in looking at early iterative slave codes, there is really no unanimity around what dance generally means, or what African dance (still quite general, but more specifically) means. In some instances, “dance” is the crossing of ankles, or the pairing of bodily motion to music, or movement articulated while near another body. In other instances, “dance” is synonymous with simply seeming joyful without having received the sanctioning of fun from an owner or overseer.

Further, we know that the transmission of these codes and laws were uneven, and also that the creation of codes did not insure their enforcement on the ground, “for the gap between publication and practice often meant that the law was honored more in the breach than the observance” as Sally Hadden has written.<sup>5</sup> So I have been interested in how “dance” showed up and what it shows up to describe, particularly during slavery — a *durée* we might think of as straight-forwardly evil, but for which that evil is diversely constituted and expressed.

It is worth saying, however basic to this group, that the first language that we get around “Black dance” is dance as a strategy for disciplining captive African people into not-dead commodities. Two illustrative first-person accounts from the Middle Passage:

#1: Their allowance consisted of one pint of water a day to each person; they were fed twice a day with yams and horse beans. After meals they jumped in their irons for exercise. This was so necessary for their health, that they were whipped if they refused to do it, and this jumping has been termed dancing. On board most slave ships, the shackled slaves were forced to ‘dance’ after meals.<sup>6</sup>

#2: Our blacks were a good-natured lot and jumped to the lash so promptly that there was not much occasion for scoring their naked flanks. We had tambourines aboard, which some of the younger drakes fought for regularly, and every evening we enjoyed the novelty of African war songs and ring dances [...] with the satisfaction of knowing that these pleasant exercises were keeping our stock in good condition and, of course, enhancing our prospects of making a profitable voyage.<sup>7</sup>

Thus “dance” was not about health, but rather about flesh arriving in new worlds physically capable of carrying out their diligence as commodities. “Dance” was both a way to ensure not dying and social death.<sup>8</sup>

I wonder about the use of dance that we see mobilized as anti-Black torture during the Middle Passage to the impermissibility of “African” (and then “Black”) dance in the slave holding south. Far more foundationally, I wonder what the stakes are of inaugurating a Black dance history through a story ultimately about Black resistance, but not about white supremacist violence. (And I should say that I follow Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez when they write in the introduction of *Black Performance Theory* this: “Black performance contains history and racism, but it is not about either of those things.”) In addition to dance practice as a potential assertion of self-hood, we have to also be clear that Black ambiguity around dance existed precisely because of its continued relationship to the project of white supremacy: coerced movement to satiate white appetites for capital and control.

Saidiya Hartman helps us here. Dance is not listed in her index, but it appears in her book *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*.<sup>10</sup> Hartman writes this:

Lu Lee's owner encouraged the enslaved to have Saturday night dances even though he was a religious man and thought it wrong to dance. Lee remembered him saying "Seek your enjoyment, niggers got to pleasure themselves someway." [...] the promotion of innocent amusements and harmless pleasures was a central strategy in the slave owner's effort to cultivate contented subjection. However, the complicity of pleasure with the instrumental ends of slaveholder domination led those like Mary Glover to declare emphatically, "I don't want [that kind of pleasure]." [...] the sense of operating within and against these closures made the experience of pleasure decidedly ambivalent.<sup>11</sup>

I wonder what happens when we situate histories of Black dance as rooted in the ambivalence Hartman names, and not only in the Black fortitude of retentions, innovations and transformations. The complex archives around Black people in motion seem to be their own specific history: histories less about what Black dance indexes, but more about what it has been an instrument of and toward. In the plainest words: I think it is important that we perpetually hold the fact that "Black dance" includes white supremacist violence alongside Black doubt, unwillingness, and compunction.

There is often an assumption that Black folks dancing means personal or group decisiveness, one that signals Black self-possession and individual sovereignty. My point —and this is incredibly important to emphasize— is not that Black dance does not include resistance, retentions or innovations. I am not taking up an issue with Black dancers. Rather, I am working to say that part of a foundation of the language of "dance" as it applies to Black people is white terror. White terror is nowhere near Black dance's sum, but it does figure into its alchemy. Raising questions about dance as potential violence forces us to take a more sobering look at our sometimes unquestioned terms. Perhaps it might also further enable us to do work that does not fall into a romance with Black cool, but reveals the histories of ambiguity and contestation that we might, still, find traces of in Black dance today.

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## Notes

1. "An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province" or The Slave Code of South Carolina, May 1740.
2. Jacqui Malone's *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today* (Princeton: Princeton Book Company, 1988).
3. The author first heard Rinaldo Walcott share this framework during a weekend-long symposium at Rutgers University entitled "Scenes at 20" on October 7, 2017. Wilcott's forthcoming book which outlines this theory, *The Long Emancipation: Moving toward Black Freedom* (Duke University Press) is set to be published in April 2021.
4. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 12.
5. Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 52.
6. Thomas Clarkson, *History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
7. Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*, Stephanie E. Smallwood (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).
8. Katrina Dyonne Thompson, *Ring Shout, Wheel About: The Racial Politics of Music and Dance in North American Slavery* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2014).
9. DeFrantz and Gonzalez, "Introduction: From 'Negro Expression' to 'Black Performance,'" in *Black Performance Theory* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2014), 9.
10. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
11. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 49.

# The Problem with "Dance"

Prarthana Purkayastha

***Duttababur nachghorete / baya tabla baje  
Rupo Dasi Chuno Dasi / jora baiji nache.  
In Duttababu's dance house/ The left tabla plays  
Rupo Dasi Chuno Dasi/ a pair of baijis dance.***<sup>1</sup>

Such rhymed couplets would often appear as embroidered writing in *kanthas* (hand-stitched fabrics), and hand-made *pats* (paintings) made by *patuas* (rural artisans) in nineteenth century Bengal, India. The couplets would appear beneath visual representations of dancers, in this case underneath a female duet stitched into fabric. I have tried looking for Rupo Dasi and Chuno Dasi, but so far, the colonial archives have been silent. But I know that *Duttababur nachghor* (Mr Dutta's dance house) did exist. I know that the tabla boomed loud and clear. I know that when Rupo and Chuno danced, many travelled for miles and gathered to watch them wide-eyed with amazement. I know because the *kantha*, the hand stitched fabric, tells me so.

Based on my current archival research project on Indian dance and visual culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Bengal (which has the working title "Dance Remains") I propose three decolonial maneuvers for revisiting narratives of dancers and dances erased by British colonial, Indian nationalist violence and Brahminical and upper-caste patriarchy, noting that the word "maneuver" suggests

a movement that requires both skill and care. The first maneuver is in response to the problem with the term "dance" and the problem of finding dancers when working within, against and beyond the colonial archives. As established by the scholarly work of Amrit Srinivasan, Pallabi Chakravorty, Davesh Soneji, and many other scholars working on dances from the South Asian subcontinent, "dance" became both etymologically and ontologically suspect in British colonial India.<sup>2</sup> I wish to highlight here (following Spivak) the epistemic violence of the colonial term "nautch," which was an anglicized corruption of the Hindi and Bengali word for "dance:" *naach*.<sup>3</sup> I wish to draw attention to the cannibalizing force of this anglicized word "nautch" when it devoured and digested into one undistinguishable mass a vast range of dance practices from across the South Asian subcontinent in the nineteenth century: the anti-nautch movement of the 1890s culminated in the 1947 Prevention of Dedication Act, and in a free and independent India "nautch" by *devadasis* (itself a highly problematic and unstable Orientalist term, as argued by Nrithya Pillai) was successfully criminalized and the genteel "nritya" sanctioned in official discourse.<sup>4</sup>

The first decolonial maneuver is therefore to reclaim the word *naach*, and along with it, to rehearse the history of the *naachwalis* – in the specific context of this research, the under-analyzed labour of "courtesans" and other subaltern dancing women who were pushed

underground through Christian missionary discourse, British colonial law and Indian nationalist reform movements. My interest is specifically aligned to the *bibis* or prostitute/dancers of nineteenth century Bengal, who haven't received as much academic attention as their southern Indian sisters, in the hereditary courtesan communities, or the northern Indian *tawaifs*. To retrace the *bibi's* steps when faced with a lacuna in the colonial archive, I turn to the popular and satirical visual art works of nineteenth century *patuas*, the Kalighat painters of Bengal, and to the turn-of-the-century oleographic and chromolithographic prints of Bengal's female salon artists produced by Calcutta's print studios, such as the Kansaripara and Chorebagan Art Studios. These visual archives consist of several iconic images of Calcutta's most celebrated singers and dancers: through the bold brush strokes of the *patuas* and the layering techniques of Calcutta's art studios, we meet characters such as Golap Sundari in Kalighat paintings, or Promoda Sundari and Sushila Sundari in popular chromolithographic prints. They can be seen reclining on their armchairs, holding a rose, preparing the *paan* (betel leaf), playing the *tabla*, playing the *veena*, and embracing their lovers (the hapless Bengali upper class/caste *babu*)—the latter sometimes even turning into a sheep on a leash in the *bibi's* hands. Alongside mobilizing these nineteenth-century visual archives, one must also turn to the satirical Bengali writings of nineteenth-century poets and authors: Kaliparasanna Singha's *Hutom Pyachar Noksha (Sketches by an Observant Owl, 1861)* and many other Bengali texts like it must enter this dance historian's world to reveal the ways in which "naach" was reconstituted by both white colonial and brown native patriarchy even while it flourished in popular visual culture.<sup>5</sup>

The second decolonial maneuver is to highlight acts of anti-colonial agency from seemingly disenfranchised nautch dancers in order to notice not only what dance does but also what it undoes in the colonial archive. In my recent work on nautch dancers featured in nineteenth century British colonial exhibitions, I have found displays of extraordinary courage from subaltern subjects. For example, in the winter of 1885, a group of Indian "natives" were shipped from India by Liberty's of London, a luxury department store, to be installed as human exhibits in a "living Indian village" at the Albert Palace in Battersea Park.<sup>6</sup> The 45 Indians were housed in squalid rooms, exhibited live in freezing conditions, and ultimately abandoned by their recruiting agents and producers in London. Led by a nautch dancer, the group sought legal action in London's courts of law, and finally returned to

India starving, having lost a member of the group, but having turned justice in their favor. In an archival breakthrough, I have found the names of the 45 natives through an official document that tells us where each individual hailed from in India, confirming their name, profession and age.<sup>7</sup> In naming these 45 real people back to life, my research sees dance as a retrospective act: i.e. dance reflects on the past but also brings into relief the historian's own class/caste position, privilege, and responsibility in narrating the subaltern's story.

The third decolonial maneuver I propose is that we mobilize dance to attend to the ideas of reparation, restitution, repatriation and apology. These ideas have begun to take on a life force since I first gave my talk "Decolonizing Human Exhibits" in April 2018, since the little-known story of who I call the Forgotten 45 first came to light.<sup>8</sup> Audiences have often asked me how far the trail of the 45 exhibited Indians can go, now that we have their names? Can Liberty of London be asked to publicly apologize? Can the families of the Forgotten 45 be found and can they be compensated? How far can dance go?

This returns us to the question asked in the introduction to this Gathering: how do we ensure that "to decolonize" is not a metaphor and that "decolonization" is not a noun? In this paper, I have proposed three necessary moves for re-thinking the scope of dance: reclamation, retrospection, reparation – decolonial acts that unearth, unsettle and undo history as well as our present-day practices of historical writing, archiving and ethical embodying of appropriated or subjugated knowledges.<sup>9</sup>

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## Notes

1. Sri Pantho, *Kya Baat Meye* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1988). My translation. A *baiji* is a term used in Bengal in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for a professional dancer/singer; the word carries stigma as *baijis* were also understood to be women who offered sexual services to their clients for money.
2. Amrit Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance," *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no. 44 (November 1985): 1869–76; Pallabi Chakravorty, *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2008); Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and*

*Modernity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

3. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 66-111.
4. See Nrithya Pillai, "The Politics of Naming the South Indian Dancer." *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies* special issue "Decolonizing Dance Discourses," edited by Anurima Banerji and Royona Mitra. Vol XL (2020): 17-19.
5. Arun Nag, ed., *Satik Hutom Pyachar Noksha* by Kaliprassana Singha (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, [1861] 2008).
6. See Saloni Mathur, "Living Ethnological Exhibits: The Case of 1886," *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 15, no. 4 (2008): 492-524. The article offers an excellent discussion of this and other anthropological displays in colonial exhibitions.
7. For details, see Prarthana Purkayastha, "Decolonizing Human Exhibits: Dance, Re-enactment and Historical Fiction," *South Asian Diaspora*, vol. 11, issue 2 (2019): 223-238.
8. Prarthana Purkayastha, "Decolonizing Human Exhibits," Keynote Lecture, Society of Dance Research Annual Conference, *Dance in the Age of Forgetfulness*, Royal Holloway University of London, Egham, April 18, 2018.
9. Here, I draw from Michel Foucault who defines subjugated knowledges as those "that have been explicitly disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity." See Colin Gordon, ed., *Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 82.

# RUXIMIK QAK'U'X: Inextricable Relationalities in Mayan Performance Practice

*María Regina Firmino-Castillo*

Grupo Sotz'il was founded almost twenty years ago in Sololá, Guatemala by Lisandro Guarcax and a group of other Kaqchikel Maya youth, including Lisandro's brother, Daniel Fernando Guarcax González, who has led the group since the founder's political assassination in 2010. With permission granted through community consultation and ritual, Grupo Sotz'il began experimenting with the creation of *xajoj q'ojom*—music/dance as one—to affirm the relevance of Kaqchikel Maya ways of being and knowing in the face of the ongoing colonial violence against Indigenous peoples in Guatemala, a networked violence that attempts to destroy people and their ontological praxes, including their repertoires of performance.<sup>1</sup>

Based on the group's decades of research on Kaqchikel Maya epistemologies and ontology, Grupo Sotz'il's practice of *xajoj q'ojom* is based on the following principles:

***sound and movement exist as one***

***past-present-and-future are simultaneous***

***material and immaterial beings, both, have  
personhood and agency***



Photo 1: Original members of Grupo Sotz'il, early 2000s; Photo: Grupo Sotz'il.

These three principles are rooted in the Kaqchikel concept of “*ruximik qak’u’x*” (“the binding of hearts”). It is a theory of an always and already present relationality between humans and other beings, both material and immaterial, who demand recognition and reciprocity, and who, when not attended to, can make themselves seen, heard, and felt in ways that can be disruptive, and even dangerous.

In the following, I discuss the concept of *ruximik qak’u’x* in Grupo Sotz’il’s performance practice and reflect on the implications of this ontological concept for a reparative politics and praxis of relationality. I draw from a process of co-theorization between Daniel Fernando Guarcax González, Tohil Fidel Brito Bernal (an independent researcher and artist), and me, a process shaped by the political dimensions of *ruximik qak’u’x* in ineluctable ways. The three of us were born in Guatemala, but we are positioned differently in the colonial system of classification and therefore are affected by the resultant social violence in particular ways. Daniel is Kaqchikel Maya and Tohil is Ixil and Achi Maya; both are part of an Indigenous majority that has historically suffered oppression and domination by the non-Indigenous (ladino or mestizo) minority, a group to which I reluctantly, but undeniably, belong. Knowing myself to be the product of particular corporeal relations marking the history of Guatemala in violent ways, a history which has granted me a measure of undue privilege, this collaboration is not about the decolonization or the indigenization of my person (even though I am descended from both European and Indigenous ancestors). Instead, the political and relational demands of *ruximik qak’u’x* call for an attempt at reparations, even in the face of the irreparable.

At the same time, despite and because of whatever blood passes through our three bodies, this collaboration is also an act of relational knowledge-making and world-building that affirms *ruximik qak’u’x*, the web that inextricably binds us, for better or for worse. (Reference Video 1)

In the course of our triangle of co-theorization, Daniel Guarcax explained *ruximik qak’u’x* this way: “*Ruk’u’x* is the animating nucleus of all things. People have *ruk’u’x* as do plants and animals; organic and mineral beings—rocks, mountains, and elements—and even immaterial entities such as units of time. *Ruximik* refers to the interconnections between the *ruk’u’x* of things; it is the inextricable web of contingencies that produce the worlds we inhabit.”



Video 1: Excerpt of *Xul K’ej: La Ocarina*, by Grupo Sotz’il, 2004.  
Director: Víctor Manuel Barillas. Principal Actor: L. Lisandro Guarcax G.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hut8W6gr3cU&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hut8W6gr3cU&feature=emb_logo)

*Ruximik qak’u’x* is an ontological principle of entanglement, a condition allowing for reciprocal recognition and even care through embodied acts that are quotidian, but also staged in ritual and performance.

As Daniel Guarcax explained to Tohil and me, *ruximik qak’u’x* is perceived through *retal*, unpredictable signs inviting dialogue with the beings we are entangled with. This perception can happen in the extra-ordinary spaces of performance and ritual, or in the quotidian course of an ordinary day. It entails a subtle corporeal listening and embodied response, for a *retal* can appear as a glance from another, as the ephemeral crossing of birds in flight, as the slight touch of cloth or skin against skin, or as the flux of flames in a ritual fire, and even in a cooking fire. Though unpredictable, the perception of *retal* can be cultivated, and it is a practice at the core of Grupo Sotz’il’s performance methodology.<sup>2</sup> The beings (seen and unseen) comprising *ruximik qak’u’x* are protagonists in life, ritual, and performance. Through *retal*, they are received into the space and into the body; they are acknowledged, allowing their effects to guide action, and in effect, to build worlds in which our relationality with all beings is remembered. (Reference Video 2)

When we forget our ontological embedding in *ruximik qak’u’x*, when we are not receptive to *retal*, and we are not engaged in these



Video 2: Excerpt of Uk'u'x Ulew performed by Grupo Sotz'il, 2016 KIWE/KAQCHIKEL:  
International Indigenous Cultural Exchange: Jalwachinik na'ojilal b'anob'al.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NgS3t9XFxM>

corporeal enactments of reciprocity, the beings we are inescapably entangled with feel ignored; they become louder, manifesting as illness, ecological devastation, social violence, and death. This lack of *retal* awareness is exemplified in the performance of *xajaniik*: actions in relation to others (humans, other-than-human animals, plants, places, elements, and objects) that disavow *ruximiq qak'u'x*, and give rise to unwanted consequences. For example: throwing maize on the floor results in poverty; pointing at the full moon or a ripe squash on the vine provokes putrefaction; stepping on a rope while pregnant leads to a tangled umbilical cord and fetal asphyxiation; sexual relations in cemeteries, near rivers, or altars bring premature death. There are many more *xajaniik* that detail unwanted relational repercussions along these lines. Here, I won't attempt to validate these causes and effects through empirical observation; what I do stress is how the concept of *xajaniik* highlights the hard, inescapable relationalities which we ignore at our own peril.

In this drawing Tohil conducted a visual study of the concepts of *ruximik qak'u'x* and *xajaniik* based on his research of the *Pop Wuj* (also *Popol Vuj*)—a precolonial K'iche' Maya text transcribed and translated by Francisco Ximénez, a Dominican evangelizer who lived in Guatemala during the early 18th century. The original K'iche' text was destroyed and Ximénez's transcription was stolen, ending up at the Newberry Library



Image 2: *Xajaniik*, ink drawing by Tohil Fidel Brito Bernal, 2017. This drawing depicts the rebellion of the objects during the third cycle of human existence (prior to the current cycle) as narrated in the *Popol Wuj* and speculates on the consequences of contemporary *xajaniik*.

The rocks  
the three stones that were in the fire  
hurled themselves with impetus  
aiming at their heads...  
This is how those people were destroyed....

*Popol Wuj*<sup>3</sup>

in Chicago. Despite theft and destruction, the *Popol Wuj* is ritually performed throughout the Mayan world and its philosophy is embodied and articulated by Grupo Sotz'il and other Maya artists such as Tohil. The drawing—which theorizes time as a spiraling of past-present-future—recounts the story of the third cycle of creation, when humans were made of wood. They were finely-formed, but didn't engage in reciprocity with the beings and things with which they were enmeshed. Unable or unwilling to perceive *retal*, they did not acknowledge *ruximik qak'u'x*. As a consequence, the wooden humans were attacked by all the other-than-human animals, beings, and objects in their world. Even, the objects of their own creation—including the three stones placed at the center of their hearth fires—hurled themselves at their heads, destroying them and the world they had shaped through their actions.

Now, in the fourth cycle of human history, what *xajaniik* do we commit, and what consequences might these bring?

like in the third cycle of existence, the objects of our own making,  
again attack  
this time, from the inside out

pharmaceutical, pesticidal, hormonal, radioactive,  
and petrochemical residues  
in nearly every body of water, in the blood,  
milk, semen, feces, and urine  
of nearly every mammal

viral chimerical beings reappear  
reminding us, again and again,  
of the relentless porosity of our bodies

consequences begetting consequences:  
corpo-realities not of our choosing,  
but undeniably of our making

*retal*: subtle calls, loud demands  
to recognize the beings, things, bodies  
in our midst and within us

*retal*: subtle calls, loud demands  
to remember *ruximik qak'u'x*  
the inextricable entanglements that bind us.

Given these circumstances, I end with these questions for dance-makers and those who think critically about dance, movement, and human bodies: With what acts do we acknowledge—or not—the inextricable ties that bind us to the abject, the strange, the toxic, and the viral near us, around us, and within us? What forms of corporeal dialogue do we enter into with these beings with whom we are entangled, and who are here to stay? Finally, what worlds do we bring forth with our acts?



Image 3: Lisandro Guarcax, circa 2009, Photo Grupo Sotz'il.

*May my heart bloom when it stops pumping red ink, may small thorns and yellow flowers emerge from it, may they paint it with nij and draw pictures upon it of animals and bicephalous birds.*

*May my heart decompose in the earth and grow into a pine tree, may it see through the eyes of an owl, may it walk through the legs of a coyote, may it speak through the barking of a dog, may it heal in the quartz of the caves, may it grow in the antlers of a deer.*

*May my hearts be bound with a serpent of many colors, so that they do not forget to whom they belong, may they be marked with retal, in order to find them again, on the path from here to other worlds.*

Rosa Chávez, 2010<sup>4</sup>

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## Notes

1. See María Regina Firmino-Castillo, "WHAT MA LACH'S BONES TELL US: Performances of Relational Materiality in Response to Genocide," *Transmotion* special issue on Genocide, vol. 4, issue 2 (2018). <http://journals.kent.ac.uk/index.php/transmotion/article/view/464>.
2. For more on Grupo Sotz'il's performance methodology see: Grupo Sotz'il. *Ati't Xajoj* (Guatemala City, Guatemala: Cholsamaj, 2015);  
  
Czarina Aggabao Thelen, "Our Ancestors Danced Like This: Maya Youth Respond to Genocide Through the Ancestral Arts," in *Telling Stories to Change the World: Global Voices on the Power of Narrative to Build Community and Make Social Justice Claims* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 38–54;  
  
María Regina Firmino-Castillo, Daniel Guarcax González, Tohil Brito Bernal, "Beyond the Border: Embodied Mesoamerican Transmotions," *Movement Research Performance Journal: Sovereign Movements: Native Dance and Performance*, eds. Rosy Simas and Ahimsa Timotéo Bodhran 52-53 (2020): 34-41. <https://movementresearch.org/publications/performance-journal/issue-52-53>;  
  
María Regina Firmino-Castillo, Daniel Guarcax González (on behalf of Grupo Sotz'il), and Tohil Fidel Brito Bernal, "Ruximik Qak'u'x: Inescapable Relationalities in Grupo Sotz'il's Performance Practice," *Imaginations: Revue d'études interculturelles de l'image* 10.1 (2019). <http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.CR.10.1.5>
3. Luis Enrique Sam Colop (trans), *Popol Wuj—Versión Poética K'iche'* (Guatemala City: PEMBI/GTZ/Cholsamaj, 2008).
4. Coordinación y Convergencia Nacional Maya Waqib Kej, "GUATEMALA: DUELO EN LA CULTURA MAYA: Asesinan a Lisandro Guarcax, artista guatemalteco y líder comunitario," *Diagonal* (August 27, 2010). <https://www.diagonalperiodico.net/culturas/asesinan-lisandro-guarcax-artista-guatemalteco-y-lider-comunitario.html>; The original poem by Rosa Chávez was published in Kaqchikel and Spanish; the translation into English is mine.

## Decentering Choreography: *Natya* as Postcolonial Performance-making

Cynthia Ling Lee

I'd like to acknowledge that this talk draws from an ongoing theoretical dialogue and a longer in-progress paper authored with Sandra Chatterjee. At the same time, this talk reflects and emphasizes my perspective, which is influenced by my practice as an interdisciplinary performance maker trained in kathak and US modern/postmodern dance, by my long-time collaborations with the Post *Natyam* Collective, and by my experiences of learning and teaching choreography in the context of higher education in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

My longer paper with Sandra explores how modes of performance-making embedded in Indian aesthetics exceed dominant Euro-American notions of "choreography." We ask: how does *natya*, as a multifaceted performance art, work against Western disciplinary separations? How do the musical principles of *nritta*, or abstract rhythmic dance, suggest ways of composing rhythm and body and vocal percussion that deviate from Euro-American movement invention? How might the storytelling techniques of *abhinaya* and the aesthetic theory of *rasa* offer approaches to emotion and textual interpretation that resemble "theater" more than "dance"? How does innovation within Indian classical dance's oral tradition depart from the Euro-American privileging of "newness" and original authorship?

## Choreography's Entanglement with the West

Let's take a moment to step back and consider the ways in which choreography has historically been entangled with the west. Here, I draw on Susan Foster's article, "Choreographies and Choreographers." In her critical historical analysis, Susan Foster identifies two usages for the term choreography. The first, which is no longer in common use, refers to "choreography as notating" and is linked with French dancing masters from the 1700s.<sup>2</sup> The second usage of choreography emerged in the United States in the 1920s-30s and corresponds to our contemporary understanding of choreography as "a plan or orchestration of bodies in motion," a unique work of art authored by a single artist as the result of a creative process.<sup>3</sup> This understanding of choreography marginalizes and often fails to credit "[p]ractitioners of dance traditions built upon improvisation, collective authorship, and long-standing, constantly evolving oral traditions."<sup>4</sup> Today Euro-American choreographic practices have expanded and often integrate elements of collaboration and improvisation. However, as Sandra points out, conventions of funding, crediting, booking, and marketing still privilege the notion of a fixed single-authored choreographic work.

The concept of choreography, then, is historically entangled with the

western concert stage, specifically modern dance. Foster describes how La Meri first separated the world's dances into three separate categories: ballet imparts technique, modern dance is associated with creativity, and ethnic dance is an embodiment of cultural tradition.<sup>5</sup> As such, the opposition between ethnic and modern dance mirrors "the opposition also practiced in anthropology between tradition and innovation," whereby the west is seen as the cutting edge of progress and innovation and so-called traditional practices are "often seen as unchanging, culturally specific traditions that preserved an older and perhaps vanishing way of life."<sup>6</sup>

Given all this, it's unsurprising that choreography tends to be taught in a way that privileges modern dance aesthetics, even though choreography classes are often framed as teaching universal ideas of craft applicable to any dance form. In my experience, some of the dominant compositional tools that tend to be reproduced in beginning choreography classes in the United States include:

1. manipulating movement as an abstract manifestation of space, time, and energy
2. an emphasis on movement invention and bodily inquiry
3. compositional tools originally drawn from western classical music such as motif and variation, phrasing, canon, and ABA structure
4. concepts of space wrapped up with the western proscenium, such as floor pattern, levels, and stage positions

## ***Natya* as an Alternative to Choreography**

In contrast to choreography and its entanglement with Euro-American aesthetics, the concept of *natya* offers a different model for understanding performance-making. Here, Sandra and I invoke the most expansive definition of *natya*: an integrated performance art that seamlessly brings together dance, theater, music, and design. This multi-faceted use of *natya* is consonant with the scope of the canonical aesthetic treatise, the *Natyashastra*, and is distinct from narrower definitions in which *natya* is usually translated to drama or dance-drama.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to note that the *Natyashastra* is exclusionary in a number of ways, as "the canonization of the *Natyashastra* treatise is wrapped

up in Orientalist and Romanticist scholarly discourses that authorize the 'classical' in ways that exclude folk, secular, and non-Hindu influences on the various classical dance forms." Bishnupriya Dutt and Urmimala Sarkar Munsri also characterize the *Natyashastra* as a veritable "rule-book of control" used to enforce hierarchies of gender, caste, and class.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these problematic exclusions, we have found that *natya* provides a generative alternative to western notions of choreography. Within our framework of *natya*, we include both *nritta* (abstract rhythmic movement) and *abhinaya* (storytelling or emotive communication) aspects of classical Indian dance. *Nritta* offers intricate rhythmic and compositional structures that privilege time more than western concert dance's emphasis on space. *Abhinaya* offers techniques for embodying character and interpreting texts, as well as creative applications of *rasa* and *bhava* theory that impact emotional affect and the performer-audience relationship.<sup>10</sup> *Abhinaya* is manifested through the four expressive modalities of *angika* (body), *vachika* (speech and voice), *aharya* (costume, make-up, setting) and *sattvika* (inner state or presence).

What different types of possibilities emerge when we center *natya* as a mode of performance-making rather than choreography? To answer this question, I offer a creative exercise drawn from my own artistic practice.<sup>11</sup>

## **A Hybrid *Kavita*<sup>12</sup> - Inspired by Cynthia Ling Lee's *ruddha* (*rude, huh?*)**

Choose a rhythmic composition from your classical repertoire, such as a kathak *tora* or a bharatanatyam *jaathi*. "Translate" portions of the original rhythmic composition into a spoken language such as English, choosing words that correspond to the accents and sonic qualities of the original rhythmic syllables ( *bols* ). You may "translate" entirely based on sound, which can produce delightfully nonsensical results, or alternately you can choose to craft semantic meaning through your word choice. Having created your hybrid language-*bol* composition, use it as the blueprint for your choreography. Create new movement that roughly corresponds to the meaning of the words while maintaining the classical movement where there are rhythmic syllables. Be sure that the new movement fits the timing of the rhythmic composition. You may also choose to integrate body percussion into your new movement,

so that the body produces rhythmic sound throughout. Perform your hybrid *kavita* by first performing the composition vocally as *bol parhant*, then physically dance it.<sup>13</sup>

Variation 1: Compose your own classical rhythmic composition before translating it into language.

Variation 2: Create a group *kavita*. Different dancers are assigned different portions of the hybrid word/syllable composition, creating a conversation or interaction between them.

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## Notes

1. The longer co-authored paper will address a European context and Sandra's artistic perspective more fully.
2. Susan Leigh Foster, "Choreographies and Choreographers," in *Worlding Dance*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 100.
3. Foster, "Choreographies and Choreographers," 98.
4. Sandra Chatterjee and Cynthia Ling Lee, "Rewriting Choreography: Unfaithful and Deterritorialized Translations," in *Re-Searching Dance: International Conference on Dance Research* (New Delhi: Bosco, 2009), 145.
5. Foster, "Choreographies and Choreographers," 114.
6. Foster, "Choreographies and Choreographers," 99.
7. For an English translation of the *Natyashastra*, see *The Natyasastra: English Translation with Critical Notes*, trans. Adya Rangacharya (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2010). For theoretical commentary on the *Natyashastra*, see Kapila Vatsyayan, *Bharata: The Natyasastra* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1967).
8. Sandra Chatterjee and Cynthia Ling Lee, "Remixing Natya: Revanta Sarabhai's *LDR* and Post *Natyam* Collective's *Super Ruwaxi: Origins*," in *Dance Matters Too: Markets, Memories, Identities*, eds. Pallabi Chakravorty and Nilanjana Gupta (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 204.

<sup>9</sup>. Bishnupriya Dutt and Urmimala Sarkar Munsri, *Engendering Performance: Indian Women Performers in Search of an Identity* (New Delhi: Sage, 2010), 181, 166.

<sup>10</sup>. For more on *rasa/bhava* theory, see Richard Schechner, "Rasaesthetics," *TDR* vol. 45, no. 3 (2001): 27-50. For more on the audience-performer relationship, see Uttara Asha Coorlawala, "It Matters for Whom You Dance: Audience Participation in Rasa Theory," in *Audience Participation: Essays on Inclusion in Performance* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 37-53.

<sup>11</sup>. The longer paper includes a wider variety of exercises by Post *Natyam* Collective members, highlighting different aspects of South Asian performance aesthetics.

<sup>12</sup>. A *kavita*, which is usually translated to "poem," is an item from the kathak repertoire that combines both *nritta* and *abhinaya* elements.

<sup>13</sup>. *Bol parhant* refers to the practice of reciting the rhythmic syllables of a given *nritta* composition in kathak. In performance, a kathak dancer often recites a composition, punctuated by subtle movements of the wrist, hand, and eyes, before dancing the composition in a full-bodied way.

# Dancing on Violent Ground: George Balanchine and Urban Depopulation<sup>1</sup>

Arabella Stanger

In their introduction to this Gathering, Anurima Banerji and Royona Mitra make a vital distinction. “We are conscious,” they write, “to differentiate between ‘decolonizing’ as a material act, and the decolonial as an undoing of imperialist epistemes.” Informed by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s reminder that decolonization is not a metaphor, this distinction does not so much sever the material from the epistemic as registers of anti-colonial action, as it does reveal the possibility of various tensions, (dis)junctures, and frictions between them.<sup>2</sup> These possibilities then move in dialogue with two anti-colonial texts which, while not written with the practice of dance in mind, invite a purposeful approach to theorizing dance’s and dance studies’ potential not only for unsettling structures of coloniality but also for naturalizing structures of colonialization. Written fifty years apart, from the perspectives of struggles against franchise colonialism in Algeria and Canadian settler colonialism respectively, these texts are Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and Glen Sean Coulthard’s *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (2014).<sup>3</sup> Banerji and Mitra’s call for the discursive disintegrations necessary to a decolonial dance politics finds answers in Fanon’s and Coulthard’s writings precisely because these activist epistemologies puncture liberal epistemes which, while seeming liberatory, in fact legitimize the ongoing material violence of the colonial state.

“Let us admit it,” writes Fanon, “the settler knows perfectly well that no phraseology can be a substitute for reality.”<sup>4</sup> Coulthard expands: “Fanon’s position challenges colonized peoples to transcend the fantasy that the settler-state apparatus—as a structure of domination predicated on our ongoing dispossession—is somehow capable of producing liberatory effects.”<sup>5</sup> Refuted in both of these statements is the idea that anti-colonial struggle can be served through a liberal pluralism that accommodates diverse identities all the while shoring up the sovereignty of the colonial institution, the latter being the very basis of state liberalism and a structure of domination predicated on the ongoing dispossession of those whose cultural identities the state might well recognize, represent, and affirm. I ask what the study of dance can learn from these statements about the perils of white liberal phraseology.

Field-(re)shaping approaches to this problem have been modelled in scholarship showing how dance takes part in insurrectionist struggles and cultural agitations where racialized dancing populations survive, move against, elude or transform the realities produced through colonial and white supremacist violence.<sup>6</sup> *My concern here is to contribute to this work and to learn specifically from Fanon’s and Coulthard’s statements by shifting the conversation away from dance and/as insurrection towards dance and/as dispossession.* How does dance come to work

not only against but also as part of what Fanon calls the “phraseology” of violent state apparatus? To specify a field of interest: how does dance-as-theatre-art in the context of democratic, white liberal social spaces do the work of legitimizing the violent realities on which those spaces depend? And relatedly: how might dance scholarship attend not only to a dance’s embodied phraseology—what it looks like, feels like, who and which identities it represents, what forms of corporeal expression it takes—but also to the disjunctive relationship between that phraseology and its material conditions: those socioeconomic structures of production, reproduction, and dispossession that set the terrain for lived experience? Together these questions motivate what I propose as a critical negativity in dance research: an analytical attitude attuned not to how dance improves experiences of living but to how dance’s exuberant modelling of forms of life might contribute to, prosper from, and act as an alibi for material conditions that—to borrow from Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s much-cited definition of structural racism—produce or exploit “group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”<sup>7</sup> To show this approach fleetingly in action, I turn now to a canonical theatre dance that was made to be part of a liberal phraseology concealing practices of geographic violence.

George Balanchine’s *Agon pas de deux* (1957) is a rich case from the perspective of Fanon’s and Coulthard’s critique of liberalism specifically as that dance was performed by Diana Adams and Arthur Mitchell at the opening of the New York State Theater (NYST) in Lincoln Center in April 1964.<sup>8</sup> The ballet has been described by one of its keenest audience members, the poet Frank O’Hara, as “a function of American democracy;”<sup>9</sup> it helped inaugurate a theatre described by its architect Philip Johnson as a “nonaristocratic theater of the masses”<sup>10</sup> in an arts complex described by its inaugural president, John D. Rockefeller III, as a “new kind of institution dedicated to the enjoyment of the finest art by the greatest number of people.”<sup>11</sup> This is also a dance to which field-shaking attention has been paid regarding the white-washing of ballet history. Brenda Dixon Gottschild has powerfully excavated the “black text in Balanchine’s Americanization of ballet.”<sup>12</sup> Blazing a trail picked up in more recent illuminating work by scholars including Clare Croft and Anthea Kraut, Gottschild opens a view to the racialized fantasies of *Agon*’s off-balance choreography, especially in relation to Balanchine’s appropriative collaboration with Mitchell and Mitchell’s rejoinder in ripping up the ballet dance floor with a self-determining corporeal politics of Blackness.<sup>13</sup> In the spirit of that existing research, I’d like to dig deeper into the socioeconomic beneath of his ballet, thinking

beyond its representations and performances of race—appropriative, dissenting, or ambivalent as they may be—to its reliance on another kind of racialized experience of spatial displacement: the removal of communities from the land on which they lived so that the New York City Ballet (NYCB) could take up residence at Lincoln Center in the wake of a mass depopulation program spearheaded there by Robert Moses in the late 1950s.

Less than one week before *Agon*’s premiere, with the funding of a Rockefeller grant at City Center of Music and Drama in Manhattan’s Midtown,<sup>14</sup> Moses’s Committee on Slum Clearance was authorized to embark on a program of “urban renewal” a handful of blocks northwest in Lincoln Square.<sup>15</sup> Transplanting Midtown performing arts to a neighborhood (San Juan Hill) previously known as an historic center of “Black bohemia,” Lincoln Center would stage initiatory acts of social displacement, racialized population management, and cartographical erasure.<sup>16</sup> By 1959, all residents of the Square—thousands<sup>17</sup> of working-class families, the majority earning beneath the city’s median income, only 1% owning the properties they lived in, and a large minority of whom Puerto Rican and Black—had been forcibly removed to housing projects across Manhattan, their homes demolished and maps of the area redrawn.<sup>18</sup> Aramis Gomez of the Puerto Rican Citizens’ Housing Committee explained in 1962 that this “housing programme overall seems to vision a New York without Puerto Ricans.”<sup>19</sup> Gomez’s exposure of this state-sponsored campaign of spatial-acquisition-as-racial-clearance can be read as an anti-colonial analytic that cuts through the phraseology of Lincoln Centre’s and the NYCB’s white patrician benefactors. This political elite concealed the racial geographics of their urban renewal inside a liberal discourse of corporate citizenry couched, in turn, in the philanthropic patronage of works like Lincoln Center and *Agon*. In her excellent theorization of dance patronage and the immiserating “dynamics of capitalist generosity,” Olive McKeon points to “the connections between concert dance, capital accumulation, and land use struggles,” connections which Gomez’s analytic here situates in histories of white domination through urban depopulation.<sup>20</sup>

Balanchine’s choreographic sanction of bodily displacement in *Agon* as a means of reinventing classicism for New York artists and audiences, takes on a fraught set of associations when viewed in this light of evictions and housing activism on the land on which the NYCB danced when *Agon* helped inaugurate the NYST. Following Gottschild, I argue

that the hidden legacy to be retrieved by digging into the ruins of Lincoln Square and the sped-up, up-scaled, and on-the-edge classicism built upon those ruins, is located in the Black moves Balanchine's ballets take up as stylistic possessions but more fundamentally in his company's material dependence upon the spatial dispossession of racialized and impoverished New Yorkers. When Balanchine choreographs an "edgy" *pas de deux* for a Black man and a white woman in the late 1950s, this dance does something more specific than engage in the agitations of a burgeoning civil rights movement.<sup>21</sup> Viewed through the analytic mobilized by Puerto Rican activists against Moses's and Rockefeller's space-acquisition project, it is clear that the institutional and corporeal phraseology of Balanchine's "democratized" ballet came also to bolster the settler and corporate imaginaries with which the New York business, political, and cultural elite laid claim to the land of the city. It is these kinds of buried histories, I contend, which urge us to dig beneath choreographic articulations of democracy and representations of racial identity, seeing through dance's moving claims to the ground on which it moves..

María Regina Firmino-Castillo, Susan Leigh Foster, Danielle Goldman, Kéline Gotman, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Imani Kai Johnson, Jasmine E. Johnson, Anthea Kraut, SanSan Kwan, Susan Manning, Avanthi Meduri, Royona Mitra, Janet O'Shea, Prarthana Purkayastha, Cristina Rosa, Marta Savigliano, Jacqueline Shea Murphy, Priya Srinivasan, and Yutian Wong.

7. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.
8. Agon was performed on the first two nights of the New York City Ballet's opening week at Lincoln Center (April 20 and 21, 1964). See: City Center of Music and Drama, Inc., "Analysis of NYCB Co. Spring 1964 Season" [NYCB financial records], Box 18, Folder 6, Morton Baum Papers, 1938-1968 \*LPA Mss 1992-001, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York City, USA.
9. Michael Magee, *Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz and Experimental Writing* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 151.
10. Philip Johnson cited in Anon, "Essence of a Theater," *Newsweek*, May 4, 1964, 53, in Box 1, Folder 10, Lincoln Kirstein Papers (1914-1991), (S) \*MGZMD 97, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York City, USA.
11. John D. Rockefeller, "The Arts and American Business," *Music Journal* vol. 17, no. 2 (February 1959): 11, 64.
12. Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and other Contexts*, (Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1996), 60.
13. Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence*, 70; Clare Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Anthea Kraut, *Choreographing Copyright: Race, Gender, and Intellectual Property Rights in American Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
14. In 1953 the NYCB benefitted from a donation of \$200,000 by the Rockefeller Foundation to City Center. The sum was split between

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## Notes

1. Expanded material from this paper is forthcoming in Arabella Stanger, *Dancing on Violent Ground: Utopia as Dispossession in Euro-American Theatre Dance* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021).
2. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* vol. 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-40.
3. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* [1961], trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963); Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
4. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 45.
5. Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 23.
6. Among these conversations, and particularly important for guiding my work, is the scholarship of 'Funmi Adewole, Anurima Banerji, Melissa Blanco Borelli, Naomi Bragin, Clare Croft, Thomas DeFrantz,

the Center's resident ballet and opera companies for the creation of new works, including *Agon*. See Lynn Garafola, "Dollars for Dance: Lincoln Kirstein, City Center, and the Rockefeller Foundation," *Dance Chronicle* vol. 25, no. 1 (2002): 101–114.

<sup>20</sup> Olive McKeon, "Dance, Real Estate, and Institutional Critique: Reconsidering Gloriana Kaufman's Dance Philanthropy in Los Angeles," *Lateral* vol. 7, no. 2 (2018): [para. 7], <https://doi.org/10.25158/L7.2.4>.

<sup>15</sup> For important cultural analysis of the Lincoln Center project see Julia Foulkes, "The Other West Side Story: Urbanization and the Arts Meet at Lincoln Center," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* vol. 52, no. 2 (2007): 227–247, and Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 155–250.

<sup>21</sup> For readings of the pas de deux against the backdrop of Civil Rights actions, see: Gottschild, *Digging*, 64; Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats*, 79; and Sally Banes, *Dancing Women, Female Bodies on Stage* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 195.

<sup>16</sup> Marcy Sacks, "San Juan Hill," in *Encyclopaedia of the Harlem Renaissance*, Volume 2, ed. Cary D. Wintz and Paul Finkelman (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 1083.

<sup>17</sup> Accounts differ on the number of those relocated. In a 1959 address to the New York Chamber of Commerce, John D. Rockefeller III mentions "the relocation of the 1,747 families." See: Rockefeller, "Lincoln Center: A Progress Report" [June 4, 1959], Box 27, Folder 12, Morton Baum Papers, 1938-1968 \*LPA Mss 1992-001, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York City, USA. Samuel Zipp, though, writes, "the tenant groups would put the number closer to 7,000" (*Manhattan Projects*, 219).

<sup>18</sup> Committee on Slum Clearance and Richard C. Guthridge, "Lincoln Square, Slum Clearance Plan Under Title 1 of the Housing Act of 1949 as Amended," [New York: Charles Francis Press, 1956]: 50 and 40, Box 116 (1955-1957), *100 Years: The Rockefeller Foundation*, [https://rockfound.rockarch.org/digital-library-listing/-/asset\\_publisher/yYxpQfel4W8N/content/lincoln-square-slum-clearance-plan-under-title-1-of-the-housing-act-of-1949-as-amended](https://rockfound.rockarch.org/digital-library-listing/-/asset_publisher/yYxpQfel4W8N/content/lincoln-square-slum-clearance-plan-under-title-1-of-the-housing-act-of-1949-as-amended).

<sup>19</sup> Gomez in "Puerto Rican Citizens' Housing Committee Report," January 1962, cited in: J. Clarence Davies, III, *Neighborhood Groups and Urban Renewal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 133. Ella Howard explains that urban renewal programs of the era were referred to as "'Negro removal' or 'Puerto Rican removal' projects'." See *Homeless: Poverty and Place in Urban America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 124–5.

## Women Dancers and Morality in Bangladesh

*Munjulika Tarah*

While doing archival research on dance in Bangladesh in the 1960s and 70s, I started coming across articles about women dancers in popular magazines and newspapers that revealed some curious commonalities. A 1967 article in the newspaper *Purbodesh* titled “*Baap-ke Faki Diye Nijer Pocchondo Moto Biye Korlo*” (“Got married without father’s consent”) reports that the “*nortoki*” Amina Nammi was missing<sup>1</sup> (the Bangla word *nortoki* literally means “dancer” but is often used to refer to a female dancer of low social status who is thought to be available for sex).<sup>2</sup> Nammi’s *buro baap*, her old father, was searching relentlessly for her. But a few days later Nammi revealed that she had eloped and gotten married to a man of her choice. Another article in a 1973 issue of the popular magazine *Bichitra* is titled “*Biye Por Nachte Dite Hobe*” (“I should be allowed to dance after marriage”) and describes the career aspirations of the dancer Onjona Shaha.<sup>3</sup> The common theme here, as you can guess, is marriage.

In the series of articles I found from this period, there were also some significant differences. For example, the 1967 article about Nammi, published before Bangladesh’s independence in 1971, did not have much information about the circumstances of Nammi’s life, how she ended up as a *nortoki*, where or how she learned to dance, or what types of dances she performed. But the 1973 article about Shaha introduced her as a well-known *nritto shilpi* (dance artist) who has

trained in Bharatanatyam, Manipuri and contemporary dance for the past thirteen years. Because it is common that Bangladeshi women do not or cannot continue their dance careers after marriage, often due to objections of the new in-laws, Shaha asserts, “*Ami shoshur barir shongge kotha bole nebo, tara naachte diben ki na*” (“I will talk to my in-laws beforehand about whether they will allow me to dance or not”).

This preoccupation in the media with marriage and morality of women dancers and differences in how technique training is mentioned about specific dancers and not others, points to the history of women dancers as *nortokis*, *nachnewalis* or *bajjis* (dancers considered to be sexually available) in the Bengal region and in the Indian subcontinent, as described so eloquently by Prarthana [Purkayastha] yesterday [August 9, 2019; and in this issue, pp. 32-34], and the assumed immorality of these dancers who entertained *nawabs* and *jomidaars*, the nobility of the region. There were many *bajjis* who lived and worked in what is now Bangladesh, but like Nammi, the techniques and types of dances they performed are not mentioned in text-based archives I was able to access. So, for early women dancers in Bangladesh, technique training and the ability to claim it was a privilege.

It is also relevant here to note that the Euro-American conceptualization of “technique” and what that means for the subject position of a dancer

is a colonial framing. To my knowledge, there is no Bangla word that translates directly to “technique” but I have come across a constellation of words and phrases in the limited scholarship and in conversation with practitioners: *koushol* (technical way or strategy), *poddhoti* (method), *dhoron* (structure or framework), *prokoron* (grammar), *shoili* (artistic skill), *akar-angik* (shape, form and gesture) and *riti-niti* (custom, principles, and ethics). In this short reflection, I want to elaborate on the last one, *riti-niti*, since it points to elements of morality that are powerfully present in the articles that I referred to earlier, and in the practice of dance in Bangladesh.

*Riti* refers to how things are generally practiced, or the accepted way of doing or performing something. *Niti* and the related word *noitikota* is a person’s set of ideological principles that governs their behaviors and choices, providing guidance between right and wrong. The more I reflected on *riti-niti* as a lens for understanding technique training and the careers of early Bangladeshi woman dancers, the media’s fascination with marriage became less absurd. In fact, the history of how dance was popularized and made acceptable within the dominant Bengali-Muslim context of Bangladesh by upper-class Bengali men has hidden stories of marriages, which are not made explicit in how this history is usually presented. Many of the early middle-class women dancers of Bangladesh who had successful careers in dance were married to male dancers. A married, middle-class, heterosexual couple performing together could not be called dishonorable because 1) the man’s patriarchal privilege and middle-class status extended to his dancer-wife, and 2) the wife was under the guardianship of her husband when she performed. This shielded the woman dancer from historical associations of immorality.

After Bangladesh became independent from Pakistan in 1971, social anxiety about the morality of women dancers as reflected in the articles can be seen as part of larger questions about the type of nation that Bangladesh should become: should it be a left-leaning, aspiring modern nation like India and Yugoslavia, where women were encouraged to enter the work force, or should it be a Muslim nation, where the woman’s social place is as a wife and mother inside the home, according to conservative interpretations of Islam promoted by the Pakistani regime? With regards to dance, the answer seemed to be that women needed to be able to perform in public like in other modern nations, but within the bounds of middle-class *riti-niti*. They should not be transgressive

like the *nortokis* and *bajjis* but should be respectable and docile, in the Foucauldian sense.<sup>4</sup> We see this ideology, for example, in a 1974 article in *Bichitra* focused on the Bangladeshi dancer Lubna Marium that describes her technique training and in addition, provides texts and elaborate images about Bharatanatyam.<sup>5</sup> The article introduces Marium as a *kusholi nrittohilpi*, a trained and skilled dancer, who believes that for dance practice to be established in Bangladesh, it has to be based on classical techniques. Especially since Bangladesh does not have its own heritage of classical technique, the article asserts that dancers need to acquire training in classical dance to become *nritto shilpis* (serious dance artists) and not *nachnewalis*.

In my book manuscript from which this is drawn, *Transnational Moves: Dance and the Bangladeshi Nation*, I look further into how this lens of technique as a marker of middle-class morality, of signifying the subject position, personhood, and docility of a woman dancer, gives us new insight into the practice of Indian classical dances in Bangladesh, and India and Bangladesh’s cultural cooperation agreements of the 1970s. Under these agreements, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) gave scholarships to Bangladeshi students, most of whom were women, to study classical forms such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Manipuri, importing not just classical techniques but also standards of morality and femininity, and generating an expanding neoliberal market for upper-class Indian gurus.

Yesterday in their brilliant and moving introduction, Anurima [Banerji] and Royona [Mitra], citing the work of Julietta Singh, called for a re-examination of mastery, of the emphasis on virtuosity, and the “reaching towards indiscriminate control” (Singh 10) I will end with a question that Royona and I have been discussing within the context of what is happening in the subcontinent right now [in 2019], with India and Kashmir, with Bangladesh and the persecution of political dissidents, and the slow creep of authoritarianism all over the world: when the colonized becomes the colonizer, what are alternative ways of thinking about and activating practices of techniques that will allow us to perform different lived experiences and different histories, and enable us to go beyond the *riti-niti* and oppressive standards of morality that we have inherited?

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## Notes

1. "Baap-ke Faki Diye Nijer Pocchondo Moto Biye Korlo" ("Got married without father's consent"), *Purbodesh*, June 18, 1967, p. 1.
2. Durba Mitra, *Indian Sex Life: Sexuality and the Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).
3. "Biyer Por Nachte Dite Hobe" ("I should be allowed to dance after marriage"), *Bichitra* (August 31, 1973): 26-29.
4. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979).
5. "Bangladesher Dhruvodi Nritto" (Bangladesh's Classical Dance), *Bichitra* (July 6, 1973): 28-31.



Marie Bryant teaching a class on “dance syncopation” circa 1950 at Eugene Loring’s American School of the Dance in Los Angeles. Photograph by courtesy of the Eugene Loring Papers, Special Collections and Archives, the UC Irvine Libraries.

## Marie Bryant’s Demonstrative Body and the Reproductive Labor of Transmitting Technique

*Anthea Kraut*

This photo is from ~1950 of Marie Bryant teaching a class on “dance syncopation” at Eugene Loring’s American School of the Dance in Los Angeles.<sup>1</sup> There is much to be said here about the transmission of Africanist techniques<sup>2</sup> and maybe just as much about the failures of their transmission. If one of the goals of technique is to produce a common body, or a commons-of-bodies, this image raises questions about a commons of white ineptitude, something I want to be careful not to exclude myself from in the act of mocking it.

I have been tracking Bryant as part of my research on dance-ins in Hollywood musicals. Reportedly the “first Negro to crack the technical

side of Hollywood with the official title of assistant dance director,” Bryant taught a slew of white film stars – Debbie Reynolds, Vera-Ellen, Cyd Charisse, Ava Gardner and Mitzi Gaynor among them – both at the American School of Dance and from the privacy of her home in Los Angeles. She seems to have played an outsized and almost completely forgotten role in disseminating jazz dance on the West Coast.<sup>3</sup> She was also an incredible jazz dancer, and you should look her up on YouTube.<sup>4</sup>

In her own descriptions of her pedagogy, Bryant made a point of underscoring that her style was in fact transmittable, that it wasn’t the “kind of dancing only [African Americans] could do,” and that there was a precise method to it. She cited Mary Bruce in Chicago and Katherine Dunham in New York as her influences but also claimed to have developed a technique of her own, which she called “controlled release.”<sup>5</sup> A feature in an American School of Dance newsletter, titled “Boogie at the Barre,” quotes Bryant as “hasten[ing] to add that her technique involves more than boogie” and describes her efforts to cultivate “systematic relaxation” and the isolation of a single body part at a time – something Bryant is doing in the photograph. Her white students? Less so.<sup>6</sup>

But I am less interested here in the transmission of technique than I am in techniques of transmission. Over two decades ago, Susan Foster wrote about a “third kind of body” that operates alongside the ideal and perceived bodies to mediate the acquisition of technique. This “demonstrative body” helps produce the different corporealities that different techniques construct by illustrating correct and incorrect ways of moving.<sup>7</sup> In the photo here, Bryant clearly occupies the role of demonstrative body. Her physicality exemplifies the “controlled release” that her technique seeks to cultivate; her students intently observe and attempt to replicate her body placement, either turning their heads to look at her directly or looking frontally at her mirror image, which lies outside the frame of the photo.

My contention is that greater attention to the demonstrative bodies that mediate technique, at least in the case of jazz dance histories, can help us decenter whiteness and disrupt the hierarchies that continue to favor the performance arena, the screen, the stage – historically and still so over-determined by white supremacy – above the spaces and operations of transmission, sites where those with access seek out those with skill. As the demonstrative body, Bryant is literally front and

center here, in ways that Hollywood’s institutional racism precluded in other integrated spaces.

But I want to do more than advocate shifting our gaze to the studio. Let me be clear: recuperating figures like Bryant by writing them back into accounts of jazz dance will not decolonize our histories. Instead, my proposal is that deeper analyses of demonstrative bodies like Bryant’s, particularly through the lens of critical race and black feminist theory, can work in decolonial ways by exposing how the transmission of techniques may uphold dominant racial and gender structures, even or especially in the process of transmitting Africanisms. **In short, we need more robust theorizations of how we learn new techniques and what else is being reproduced in spaces of transmission.**

Toward that end, I suggest that we treat the demonstrative body as one who performs vital reproductive labor. More specifically, we might think of this labor as a form of in vivo reproduction – by which I mean, quite simply, that techniques live in and pass through the demonstrative body, who helps produce, or give birth to, the corporealities of others. As such, Bryant’s work at the front of the studio might not be so far removed from other forms of reproductive labor that, as Saidiya Hartman has written, are “central to thinking about the gendered afterlife of slavery and global capitalism.”<sup>8</sup>

Thinking along these lines opens up important questions that will have to serve as my conclusion: How is the reproductive labor of the demonstrative body gendered? What kind of racial logic undergirds Bryant’s role of giving new shape to bodies – and perhaps giving birth to new iterations of whiteness – even while laying the conditions for her own marginalization, insofar as the white bodies she trains may come to dance in her stead on Hollywood stages and screens? And how, finally, might we train ourselves to read against the grain of the contrast between Bryant’s smile and the labored look on her students’ faces to see the painful histories of racialized and gendered exploitation that are not identical with but may not be extricable from the transmission of Africanist techniques?

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## Notes

1. The photo is housed in the Eugene Loring Papers, Box 10, UC Irvine Special Collections, Langson Library, Irvine, USA.
2. See Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).
3. "Movie Dance Director," *Ebony* 5 (April 1950): 22-26. See also Janette Prescod, "Marie Bryant," in *Notable Black American Women*, Book II, ed. Jessie Carney Smith (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1996), 71-73.
4. For example, see Bryant dancing between the 0:17 and 0:37 marks here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFyDd8CFLVw>. From *Carolina Blues* (1944), directed by Jason Leigh, "Mr Beebe Harold Nicholas.wmv." *YouTube* video, posted March 5, 2011.
5. "Movie Dance Director," 23.
6. "Marie Bryant: Boogie at the Barre," *American School of the Dance News*, Eugene Loring Papers, Box 9, UC Irvine Special Collections, Langson Library, Irvine, USA.
7. Susan Leigh Foster, "Dancing Bodies," in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane Desmond (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1997), 235-58.
8. Saidiya Hartman, "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," *Souls* vol. 18, no. 1 (2016): 167.

# Decolonizing Gender Binaries, Decolonizing "Care"

Clare Croft

First, I am grateful for the challenge to think in this space about decolonizing dance, especially as this challenge relates to “technique.” I’m also grateful for the space to listen. I grew up—like many middle-class white women in the US—getting dropped off every day, after school, at ballet. Largely from the perspective of that white, intensely gendered, and usually heteronormative world, I’ve been thinking about the word “technique” for a long time. Even more so, I’ve spent a lot of my life using the term, “my technique”—a phrase I also hear quite a bit among my students who come from a similar social position to me. Hearing them reframe “technique” as something one possesses forces me to reflect a bit on how ballet training and all the whiteness that often surrounds ballet taught me to understand “technique” as a site of competition and drive toward sameness. To think about technique, which seemed to be the primary emphasis of those daily classes, was to see and dance in a frame attuned to competition and individuality—but not too much individuality. Compete, but also conform. These dynamics entered my habitus, and I know they remain deep within me, even as I also, now, see the dangers of these frames.

Wanting to move otherwise—to *not* just work in the relationships of conformity and competition—is a significant part of why I began working as a dramaturg and curator. I wanted to find techniques that helped me learn how to support others, to grow within another’s vision, and to love someone else’s work. Dramaturgy and curation are practices that

have helped me imagine ways of looking and being that training in US “mainstream” concert dance practices did not. Dramaturgy and curation helped me think about what I want to call (to riff on French sociologist Marcel Mauss) “Techniques *Among* Bodies.”<sup>1</sup> A concert dance and/or studio-based version of what Anusha Kedhar has called, in her writing about the Movement for Black Lives, “gestures of solidarity.”<sup>2</sup>

I’m writing this piece today [August 10, 2019] while being in the middle of the EXPLODE! Midwest queer dance festival. EXPLODE is a series of performances I’ve been curating in various iterations for seven years, including this iteration, focused specifically on queer dance in the US Midwest, which I’ve curated with Chicago-based artist Anna Martine Whitehead. With my fellow curators and a wide range of artists who shift based on what each EXPLODE site needs, I hope the platform enacts the coalitional promise of queer activism, a possibility of coming together across difference without having to erase or ignore those differences—a promise too often undermined by racism, sexism, misogyny, transphobia, and colonialism. EXPLODE works to reach for connection and support, refusing a notion of connection through dance as one predicated on competition or conformity. (And, of course, it’s not just the US white ballet and modern worlds that have taught me the techniques of competition and comparison. The neoliberal university has offered many, many lessons in this, too.)

Curation and dramaturgy demand one's focus on connection and support. There is no such thing as a curatorial or dramaturgical success not predicated upon other people's success and growth. Recently, Taylor Aldrige, a Detroit based curator and founder of the website we should all be reading more, ARTS.BLACK(<https://arts.black>), reminded me that the etymological root "curation" is in fact the Latin for "to care for." Aldridge says they draw on this root of "curation" as they cultivate their curatorial practice: to curate is to care for others. As a curator, my work is about caring for others' visions, ideas, and, indeed, bodies. As a curator, I constantly need to listen and to learn to support artists from what they offer in all their languages—spoken and danced.

Curation, however, is not a magic formula for techniques of collectivity and care. "Care" can be a dangerous word in the mouth of a white woman like me. For centuries, benevolent care has been an affective structure used to excuse colonialism and racism, and to uphold racial difference. I know this, in part, because I know I have fallen into these well-worn scripts with their privileged spaces readymade for bodies like my white, cis, American citizenship-holding self. The dangers of these scripts is part of why I hold practices of curation and dramaturgy together, since, for me, dramaturgy requires that one cares for another on the terms they offer, rather than just "performing care" in the guise of holding power, to learn to think *with* someone, rather than *about* someone. The dramaturg's role in the creative process is to understand what someone wants to do and to contribute to that vision, as opposed to pushing someone to make the work I might wish they would make.

In this vein, I learn. In EXPLODE, learning from and with has meant I've learned the urgency of undoing the gender binary. (By "the gender binary," I'm referring to the sexist, homophobic, racist, and transphobic notion that there are only two genders, that those genders are opposite, that there is a hierarchy in which femininity is less than masculinity, and that gender is essentialized in one's body.) When I began the work that became EXPLODE in 2012, the entrenchment of the gender binary in dance and beyond was not at the forefront of my mind. Committing to a program that always includes a wide range of dance forms and genres—seeing how "queer" might manifest as much in West African dance as in burlesque, in Irish step dancing as much as in Chinese contemporary dance—has required me to broaden how I think about and language gender. The drive toward competition, hierarchy, and erasure of multiplicity that has allowed the gender binary to persist is absolutely predicated on colonialist values, which deem some

people and cultures as less valuable, worthy, or capable in order to excuse treating them not as humans but as mere resources, available for extraction. As Anishinabe writer and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson has described, colonial powers imposed a strict gender binary as a "mechanism for controlling Indigenous bodies."<sup>3</sup>

The artists in EXPLODE teach me how people can and have resisted the colonialist forces of imposed hierarchy and erasure. I'm going to be corny and tell you why I love EXPLODE, and hope it doesn't just sound like advertising for my own project. Here are some of the things I love that EXPLODE has taught me: a drag queen can love women; there is room to be too much; I with "we" can survive discomfort; there are many ways to be a trans person, a woman, a gender nonbinary person, a man; bodies are sexy and messy and that is to be celebrated not contained; not everybody has to "get" everything; that a dance program that contains Chicago footwork, bellydance, Black protest dance, experimental improvisation, Culture Club songs, and West African drummers absolutely makes sense in a concert dance space; and, finally, if you get enough queers in a room, having only "M" and "W" on the bathrooms will be shown to make no fucking sense. EXPLODE has also taught me just how much work is left to do to decolonize dance, gratitude for the incredible work that has been done, and how grateful I should be to get to be part of this work. Thank you.

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## Notes

1. Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," *Economy and Society*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1973): 70-88.
2. Anusha Kedhar, "Choreography and Gesture Play an Important Role in Protests," *New York Times*, December 15, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/12/15/what-does-the-style-of-a-protest-say-about-a-movement/choreography-and-gesture-play-an-important-role-in-protests>.
3. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 123.

## (Home) Training in Breaking Culture<sup>1</sup>

*Imani Kai Johnson*

I come to Dance Studies through American and Ethnic Studies, through theories of race and gender, through studying the Black radical tradition, and through a lifelong love of dance. I come from a context wherein most people danced but few if any identified as dancers.<sup>2</sup> And I study cyphers (dance circles) as rituals for play, release, pleasure, and redress. Ultimately, I largely write from a perspective wherein the word “training” does not carry much weight. Which, by extension explains how I’ve come to this discussion of “training” feeling a little bit outside of it, in that I don’t have a strong sense of the weight of its meaning to Dance Studies, or what exactly needs decolonizing. That was one reason that, when asked to take part in this, I was hesitant to accept. I tend to avoid taking up space where a practitioner’s presence might better serve the discussion. With that said, Royona and Anurima were very clear about their invitation, very gracious in valuing my participation, and I am grateful for the opportunity to share what I have learned as a part of this larger project of decolonizing dance discourses.

I was blown away by the parts of yesterday’s Gathering that I was able to hear from behind the panelists, on the last floor seat of this same packed room. Their comments were incredible, and incredibly intimidating. My approach is a little bit more casual, and quite directly about unpacking what I’ve come to understand “training” to mean. I phrase it that way (“come to understand”) because it is not an anchoring concept in my research, and didn’t appear to be one among

the breakers with whom I spent time. In fact, it was only after I did a word search in my manuscript and literally saw the word highlighted multiple times (particularly in one chapter, published recently as an article<sup>3</sup>) that I realized it as a term I even used, though only in specific instances and with a distinct, though admittedly unnamed, connotation. What follows reflects that realization.

As a non-breaker studying breaking, and an ethnographer who picked up her use of the term by way of this research, I have come to understand “training” in two ways:

1. The first and perhaps easily recognizable definition attached to training references efforts to develop one’s skills, or take direction from more experienced dancers. It speaks to the actual work of a laboring, dancing Hip Hop body in practice.
  - a) In breaking, training often looks like a master to protégé-apprentice relationship, which can be under the guidance of a peer, an elder, or one’s crew; and is almost always also, on some level, *familial*. That is, breakers often employ the language of parentage and lineage to speak to the trajectory of their learning, and more importantly, the relationships that inform their participation in the culture (e.g. who their teachers are, who their teachers’ teachers are).

b) *In my head, I always envision sweaty breakers, gathered together in a musty room, running drills or cyphering together. Sometimes it's a single dancer going hard, improvising with the music as their "choreographic" approach.*

2. The second and more important meaning of "training" gestures toward Hip Hop cultural imperatives or sensibilities embedded in that physical practice. And this is where perhaps breaking intervenes in Dance Studies' use of the term. This version of "training" is about the meaningful principles tied to undertaking Hip Hop streetdances, which have ethical import and inform how to treat people, how to carry the dance's history, and how to operate in the world generally.

a) Whether hanging out, sitting with cultural elders and getting their stories,<sup>4</sup> training in this way includes how to ask questions about history, how to show respect (to that person, to their training lineage). Newer breakers should be especially hungry for this information and any opportunities to hear it, build on it, document it, etc. That too is because there is also a research ethic built into community-based Hip Hop streetdancing.<sup>5</sup>

- This necessarily says something about valuing insights from the dance's OG's, the "pioneering" Black and Brown working-class folks whose expertise comes from having done and been a part of breaking for so long. This is not to say that other voices in Hip Hop (e.g. those outside of the cohort of breaking pioneers) aren't present and important, but that what *matters* is **the disruption** to Western social hierarchies that disregard or even negate rather than foreground the voices and knowledges of marginalized people, of people who broader society would otherwise dismiss precisely because they aren't wealthy, academically educated, white, "professional," etc. It's the enactment of a cultural sensibility that recognizes that genius and expertise come in all forms.
- So "training" then is also about the degree to which you can humble yourself, listen, and let go of how you might've been socialized to overlook, dismiss, or invisibilize marginalized people.

b) Physical training often takes the form of cyphers, attuning its practitioners to a shared sensibility. Though breaking requires athleticism, stage presence, and competition, cyphering isn't simply a sport, choreography, or battling. The practice of cyphering teaches implicit cultural lessons built on improvising *with others*. The principles and etiquette of cyphering are imprinted with Africanist sensibilities, evident by way of aesthetic qualities (e.g. call and response, ritual derision) that repeatedly come back to collectivity and interacting with others in practice. In other words, cultural training is essential to how you put the movement-based information into your body, and part of that process is about how you engage with others.

c) It matters so much that when breakers make judgments about someone's training or lack thereof, they are more likely offering a critique of the depth of one's relationship to Hip Hop cultural imperatives and the accuracy of one's knowledge of breaking history than they are commenting about the specific movement.

In the context of my research, "training" is never just about learning movement skills; it circulates casually as a term about a deeper cultural education. Thus, when I write the word training in my manuscript, it more so reflects the concept of *home training* than physical training. "Home training" is a term in African American and African diasporic communities that generally refers to home-taught social etiquette and manners, and judgements about a lack of them.<sup>6</sup> It's more often acknowledged when it's absent (i.e. "that kid has no home training"), and can refer to anything from how you greet elders to personal hygiene. While "home training" speaks to practices that reinforce cultural sensibilities, it also invokes family and whether or not parents have properly prepared their children with the basic cultural sensibilities to be in this world. It's a testament to one's upbringing, and a point of critique about any lack of this baseline knowledge. The meaningfulness of "home training" is resonant in breaking, but this connotation is more implied or understood than formally talked about, and perhaps that's why "training" is not a heavily used term in my research.

This time to reflect on training reinforces findings in my ongoing research on Africanist aesthetics in breaking cyphers, and leads to similar conclusions about their epistemological underpinnings within Hip Hop culture. "Home training" is very clearly epistemological, promoting knowledge systems informed by diasporic sensibilities.

Ultimately, all “training” is epistemological. That being the case, I wonder what happens if we foreground its ideological and epistemological underpinnings (and consequent assumptions)? How would we talk about dance differently if we do?

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## Notes

1. Though written in advance of DSA 2019, what I ultimately presented reflected revisions made during the course of an ongoing event, including conversations with current and former graduate students who encouraged me the previous day to open my talk by clarifying my positionality. Other kinds of social interactions during the conference aided in the development of this piece, and I name them to acknowledge the changes between the original written piece, the presentation, and final printed draft. Though I maintained a style of writing that demonstrates this was a talk, I revised this publication in July/August 2020 with particular consideration of the very fruitful Q&A that followed the original presentation, and which helped me to solidify my overarching argument. I extend my deepest gratitude to Jasmine Johnson and Takiyah Amin for naming and affirming “home training” as that which I was trying to describe at that time. Finally, thank you Melissa Templeton for taking the time to read and comment on this draft.
2. Much appreciation to d. Sabela grimes for this language, about people who dance but do not identify as dancers (personal conversation, September 7, 2017). His point was to acknowledge those communities for whom music and dance are embedded in practices of everyday life, from cleaning the house on Sunday to cooking a meal.
3. Imani Kai Johnson, “Battling in the Bronx: Social Choreography & Outlaw Culture Among Early Hip Hop Streetdancers in New York City,” *Dance Research Journal* vol. 50, no. 2 (August 2018): 62-75.
4. Shout out to MiRi Park (b-girl, dance professor at CSU Channel Islands, and doctoral student in the Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance at UCLA) who, at dinner the night before the presentation and over a conversation about training, gave me this imagery of sitting and listening to an OG tell their story.

5. Community-based streetdancers often also act as informal and sometimes formal researchers, operating from a positionality that centers ethical imperatives supported by that community of dancers. I discuss this in “Critical Hiphopography in Streetdance Communities (Hard Love Part 2),” in the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook on Hip Hop Dance Studies*, which I co-edited with Mary Fogarty.
6. This is in contrast to something like “in-home training” (sometimes called home training), which refers to skills taught by a trained professional to a non-professional meant to be executed in the context of one’s own home.

# Performing Performative Decolonizing

Shanti Pillai

*Note to the reader: Hear the text in your head (including the stage instructions) as if at a Zoom dramatic reading of a play in development at a theatre near you seeking to bring diverse voices to its audiences. Due to COVID-19, the play might never actually be staged, but doing it virtually we can pretend that environmental and economic conditions will get better and live performance will make a comeback someday.*

## Prologue: *(boldly)*

In what follows I will make use of the term decolonizing, but I do not believe the term has universal definition and value. I do observe that the concept is gaining currency in the US academy. In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention that some of my colleagues in the so-called global South have reminded me that many academics like me in the US – including those hailing from the global South or with familial lineages there – like to assume that their progressive politics are universal.

## Disclaimer:

*(apologetically, almost sheepishly)*

Evidence shows decolonizing tactics make some people feel uncomfortable and sometimes...unsafe.

## Spoiler Alert: *(matter-of-fact)*

1. Decolonizing is a never-ending process. 2. Nothing I will say here will make much difference to anything.

## Act I:

One of my primary decolonizing tasks with students is to communicate that they share the planet with people who see the world very differently and that one of the benefits of this realization is to perceive one's own assumptions, aspirations, convictions and feelings as culturally and historically contingent. One of the topics I am thinking about these days is training and the ways in which in various contexts, it is not just about the transmission of performance knowledge. The question of how to train performers is shaped by agreements about the essential characteristics of a performance form, the institutionalization of its pedagogy, and whether there are opportunities for practitioners. When forms have a clearly articulated history, hegemonic training modes may encounter fewer challenges.

## Soliloquy I:

Departments and conservatories in the US market themselves as gateways to professionalization, although it is commonly known that many students will never work for any sustained time as performers. *(bring index finger to mouth)* Shhh! Don't jeopardize the capitalist imperative of education!

I am interested in contemporary performance in India, where practitioners and critics have debates about training because the artistic form does not have a well-documented archive, is hard to define, and receives minimal support. To understand training, one must situate emergent forms of pedagogy within a field of tensions in which artists stake claims about tradition's relevance, seek revenue, and contest global techniques.

## Soliloquy II: *(scratching head)*

Would a course given by an artist from India working in a radical, investigatory, process-based way be folkloric and ethnically distinct enough to allow my Chair to file this course on the list of the department's decolonizing achievements in his report to the Dean? *(pause)* Oh wait! *(as if a revelatory light bulb has gone off)* This wouldn't be a problem. Who cares what happens in classes? *(another light bulb turns on – even brighter now)* Hey! Let's get the photographer down to the studio to take a photo of the Indian artist with our students for the College website!

## Act II:

In India the question of what constitutes the contemporary is debated in the public sphere. This query is not divorced from the fact that the legacy of classical and folk forms continues to inform understandings of performance. State patronage prioritizes tradition, positing heritage against innovation such that many artists do not have a clear category in which to position themselves with respect to Ministry of Culture schemes. Audiences, including critics, are not prepared with tools for deciphering work that investigates artistic form. And venues with up-to-date infrastructure and curatorial initiatives for showcasing experimental works, or works that might not look "Indian," remain relatively few.

Conversations about what contemporary performance is are further propelled by the fact that artists produce widely disparate aesthetics. Some artists are trained in classical and folk practices, while others

have had minimal contact with them. Within the former category, there are artists who have rigorously deconstructed traditional forms, and then there are artists who continue to maintain the overall physical technique and visual display of the same form.

## Actor's Rehearsal Note:

Clarify that this is not to be likened to the aesthetic tussle between ballet and modern dance – as a Euroamerican dance history professor maybe assumed in speaking about the choreographer Chandralekha. *(throw head back and laugh)*. If the audience doesn't get this joke, that's their problem.

In India culture is a literal battleground – meaning people die -- and all the more so as narrow, ahistorical versions of tradition are promoted by right-wing, religious nationalist forces.

## Act III:

The difficulty of defining contemporary performance, as well as the paucity of funds and performance opportunities generates competition. Moreover, the lack of archival materials and institutionalization makes for few opportunities for systematic training. This prompts artists to adopt a range of stances with respect to teaching. For some it is a question of resolving the challenge of finding dancers with whom they can work. For example, choreographer Padmini Chettur has frequently offered classes in Chennai for her own dancers to acquire the skills for her ensemble pieces. Although Padmini's training at the outset of life was in Bharatanatyam, not all of her dancers come with classical training; relatively few Bharatanatyam dancers in Chennai see experimental dance as artistically or socially legitimate. Although Padmini trains her dancers in the techniques she herself has developed, she believes that Indian forms provide important physical material for investigation that can allow contemporary dance in India to avoid the poor imitation of European vocabularies.

A few artists have seized upon pedagogy as a means to overcome the lack of steady income from performance. The Adishakti Theatre Company outside Pondicherry conducts 10-day workshops to impart their technique rooted in exploration of Kudiyaattam and Kalarippayattu. At a Rs. 45,000, the workshops fund Adishakti's long devising process and its bucolic campus.

Other pedagogical platforms contest the singular relevance of traditional forms, advocating for other movement techniques to be claimed as Indian. The opening in 2018 of Ambedkar University Delhi's MA Program of Performance Practice (Dance) was promoted in response to the fact that higher education opportunities were restricted to post-grad courses in classical forms. Seventeen of the eighteen students at the start of the program had no previous training in a traditional form. Some were the products of dance schools such as Danceworx in Delhi, where students receive jazz, ballet, modern and hip hop. These sorts of schools get students jobs. For example, Terrance Lewis of the Terrance Lewis Professional Training Institute of Mumbai claimed at dance conferences in Kolkata and Chennai in 2018 to have placed thousands of dancers in Bollywood.<sup>1</sup> Although Lewis – a product of the Alvin Ailey School – has created a genre he calls Indo-Contemporary that he readily markets abroad, other participants at the conferences regretted privately to me that Lewis's commercial work had been placed into the same category as that of other artists they saw as making "real art."

The Ambedkar MA program's studio component is directed by choreographer Mandeep Raikhy who completed a BA in Dance Theatre at the Trinity Laban Conservatory in London in 2005. In an interview with me in 2018, he stated that he was skeptical about the Laban curriculum – in which several artists from India have trained – because it took dancers from all over the world and made their bodies and choreographic choices look alike.<sup>2</sup> He designed the Ambedkar University program so that students would learn from artists with various movement approaches. Yet it is uncertain what students will do after graduation, or if the university will continue the program.

## Epilogue:

In the context of contemporary performance in India, training enables artists to stake claims about what constitutes the contemporary and to support their performance making. These claims are contentious because they are shaped by fraught histories and economies of cultural production. The moral of the story: A decolonizing research agenda for the study of systems of dance knowledge transmission must acknowledge that training is not just about techniques, nor are the politics only about how the Western academy appropriates, translates, or theorizes the techniques of its fetishized Others.

## Fundraising Pitch: *(coquettishly)*

For those of you distracted by the charm of my distinct perspective and pleasingly exotic appearance, please continue to harbor your fantasies rather than listen to what I have said. Your perceptions are what have kept me employed.

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### Notes

1. The first conference, Samabhavana, was organized in Kolkata in March 2018 by the Sapphire Creations Dance Company. The second was a day-long meeting of choreographers and presenters organized by Prakriti Foundation in Chennai in August 2018.
2. Mandeep Raikhy, interview with author, New Delhi, India, July 22, 2018.

# The Materiality of Knowledge in Filipino<sup>1</sup> Martial Arts Training

*Janet O’Shea*

My instructor and I are training in a backyard in a sprawling suburban neighborhood south of Los Angeles. We checked in at a makeshift desk, set up in a garage and positioned in front of more gear than I’ve ever seen in one place: live rattan sticks, soft sticks, training blades, gloves, helmets, and arm guards. The yard is sparse – wood chips crackle under our feet – and, although it’s well after sundown, it’s lit only by a single bare bulb. About twenty of us are here to train with Tuhon Larry of the Tactical Combative Kali System, famous for its aggressive and pragmatic approach to Filipino martial arts (FMA).

The other students are mostly men – a fairly even mix of apparently Filipino, white, and Latino – and ranging from mid-adolescence to middle age. Nearly everyone, even the three other women, are clad in khakis, down vests, and baseball caps. Their dress and demeanor seem to reflect what I had heard about this system: Tactical Combative Kali’s reputation in FMA circles is for a no-nonsense approach to the art, rooted in what martial artists refer to (problematically) as “the street,”<sup>2</sup> the experience of human violence, and driven by a deeply survivalist mentality that overlaps with libertarian politics.

Tuhon – which roughly translates as grandmaster – teaches a drill deceptive in its simplicity. Known as attack and recover, the drill’s purpose is to sufficiently escape an incoming strike, angling off of and behind the opponent’s forward energy, repositioning at an angle from

which to strike the opponent’s neck. Tuhon tells us he developed this drill after seeing his friends and family members fail in street fights, including those involving blades.

Later, he teaches us a technique called stacking, used for managing multiple attackers. The goal is to use footwork and swift, unpredictable movement, repositioning so that the opponents line up behind one another, rendering them, at least, for an instant, one body.

In between teaching, Tuhon regales us with stories meant to reinforce his insistence that this is no abstract martial art. He tells us about growing up in a rough east coast US city, which he never names. Stories of how his father taught him to move soundlessly through their home, crouching, machete in hand, ready to slice the Achilles tendon of an intruder. It’s clear from how he tells the story that this wasn’t merely a drill and the break-ins weren’t just a theoretical possibility. In between, he speaks about the generational poverty of his neighbors in the Poconos, where he now lives.

Tuhon Larry is charming and funny, and the light-hearted quality of his delivery almost undercuts the content of his statements. Almost.

There’s a pathos here that Tuhon’s bright tone and winning smile can’t override. Real and tragic experiences of loss are summed up but not

fully dismissed in his flippant descriptions of street-fight failures as scientific experiments: “That didn’t work. OK, write that down.” The depth of this despair comes across when Tuhon speaks of his father’s premature death from heart disease: the tragedy of a warrior brought down by the food oppression of the US city.

An additional awareness of loss also comes through in the preliminaries around Tuhon Larry’s teaching: his student circulated a waiver with the usual martial arts reminder – *this kind of thing is dangerous so don’t sue us when you get your foolish self hurt* – alongside another one: *this material is yours to use but it isn’t yours to teach*. Attack and recover, as a system, isn’t a secret: it’s on the Tactical Combative Kali website.<sup>4</sup> But it is also positioned as part of the Tactical Combatives family legacy, with family defined not by blood or even by affective connections, but by instructional lineage. It is specifically not treated as a universal insight available for use from any perspective and to any purpose. It is not part of the commons.

There’s the sense here that knowledge has a materiality: it is a thing or perhaps a territory that is in danger of being taken away, disconnected from its source. Such a removal would be a loss both for Tuhon – something would be taken from him – but it would also be a loss for the art.

This materiality of knowledge comes out of the history of FMA as an art of guerilla warfare and of anticolonial resistance. It is also embedded in the history of FMA and its pathways of circulation. It connects outward to the status of the US as settler colony turned metropolitan colony, with the Philippines, of course, as one of the earliest targets of expansionist colonialism. It likewise intersects with closely related patterns of migration into the US and, in the case of Tuhon Larry’s teaching, with American histories of geographical racism, including redlining, environmental racism, and food oppression.

Filipino martial arts, as John McClung points out, arose directly out of anti-colonial resistance. Unlike martial arts, such as karate that were deployed as part of the strategies of state building, FMA is democratic in nature, arising independently from any central authority and rendering it, in McClung’s terms, “the people’s martial art.”

FMA developed out of small-scale conflict as each ethnic group, each village, sometimes each family developed their own tradition. It was

also used to repel invaders, including Spanish colonizers and Japanese forces during World War II. This history both connects FMA to land rights and other decolonial struggles while also linking it to less progressive impulses such as globalized Islamophobia and the violence of the nation-state. As Neil Gong<sup>5</sup> points out, its history of tribal and village affiliations renders it appealing for American libertarians, of a range of racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds, with their celebration of personal responsibility and small-group social organization.

This idea of the materiality of knowledge, in this instance, engages other, more conventionally material concerns such as governmental policy, money, housing, food, and violence. As such, it raises questions around what is held in common versus what is kept protected as well as about the line between the decolonial and decolonization. This, in turn, raises a few gentle and, I hope, respectful challenges to the theme of this conference, *Dancing in Common*.

Colonialism functions as an ideology but it is, at its core, an economic proposition. It hinges on taking collectively held (not necessarily held in common) entities and, in Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s terms, turning them into “things.”<sup>6</sup> As such, if we take seriously the indigenous studies claim that decolonization is not a metaphor, then we also need to take seriously a corresponding idea: that maybe not all training systems are, need to be, or ought to be held in common. That which is available to all may, ideally, be shared, but it can also easily be exploited. FMA, especially its more secretive iterations, suggests that an effort to truly decolonize in dance studies might mean looking not only to what might be held in common but also to respecting what is kept hidden, and why.

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## Notes

1. Filipino Martial Arts is an umbrella term for the combative practices of the archipelago, including such practices known as Kali, Eskrima, Arnis, etc. It would perhaps be more accurate, perhaps, to refer to the practice as Filipinx Martial Arts, since its practitioners include those of all genders. However, because practitioners refer to it as Filipino Martial Arts, I retain this nomenclature here.
2. Elsewhere, I have problematized the martial arts convention of referring to real-world violence as “the street,” given that most violence happens in the home. See Janet O’Shea, *Risk, Failure, Play: What Dance Reveals about Martial Arts Training* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
3. I’m using pseudonyms but if you Google “attack and recover,” it will take you right to the real organization on which this description is based.
4. John McClung, “The People’s Martial Art: Filipino Martial Arts and Decolonial Praxis.” *Native Modernities: Histories, Politics, and Arts of Indigeneity* (2014). <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/handle/1773/34310>.
5. Neil Gong, “How to Fight without Rules: On Civilized Violence in ‘De-Civilized’ Spaces,” *Social Problems*, vol. 62, no. 4 (2015): 605-622.
6. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* vol. 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-40.

## Love and "Looking": Rituals of Immersion

*Melissa Blanco Borelli*

**Immersion.** From the Latin root *immergere*, to dip into. By the early 15th century it had reached the English language as a verb, **to immerse**, with the noun **immersion** appearing in the late 15th century. It is not a surprise if we think about some significant events of the late 15th century that changed the world forever: 1469, the removal of the Moors from Spain, historicized by the Spanish as La Reconquista (or reconquest of Spain from the Moors), and the subsequent encounter, contact and the beginning of colonization of the Americas in 1492. These encounters offered an immersion into difference, which then were malevolently transformed into well-conceived performances of Empire and ecclesiastic authority; committed immersive performances of power, cultures and identities, for all to watch and experience. While the idea of immersion as a "dipping into" sounds non-committal and benign, I am gesturing to two things in this short think piece. First, the violent enactments of conquest and colonization that began from a desire to know (and subsequently overpower and erase) that continue to undermine the potential for equal relations among all of us; and second, the ways in which "dipping into" or immersing oneself into difference can be conceptually recalibrated to offer capacious and compassionate forms of relationality.

What does it mean to be immersed into culture? To dip into culture(s)--one's own, which is full of differences among its supposed similarities,

or other cultures, which is a different kind of difference--with people who are often visibly (or virtually) different than us. What lenses do we use to see them ... to perceive them... to understand them? If human experience could be considered a set of constant encounters, how do we become sentient (and literate) to the gestures, rhythms, relations, habits, movements, and qualities of other bodies around us? As Omi L. Jones says, how do we commit to "a tireless striving for the physical details that make up cultures" in our work?<sup>1</sup> And, what does love and looking have to do with it?

Sight undermines immersion, at least the way I am thinking about it here, because sight has been a site of epistemic violence since the first cross-cultural encounter, conquest and colonization. It was upon the visible Othering of those who did not look like White Europeans (or possess their supposed "humanity") that our modern systems of racism are predicated. So, what are the ways in which we can become immersed and enmeshed with one another in a way that does not undo colonialist violence but that, instead, moves towards different types of relationality that are not reliant on sight? How can we engage in immersion while decentering the primacy of sight?

In order to think through these questions, I want to consider the work of Ebony Noelle Golden's [\*125th and Freedom\*](#), a public performance that has ten choreopoetic rituals staged along 125th Street between

the Harlem and Hudson rivers in New York City. The piece was “co-conjured with an ensemble of over 30 community members [and it] garnered an audience of over 100 spectators who participated in the five-hour durational ritual.”<sup>2</sup> I appreciate that she calls it a ritual. This already shifts the way I experience it. As I watch the brief encounters unfold throughout their highlight reel, I am reminded of what Caribbean philosopher Édouard Glissant considers a Relation: it is “that moment where we realize that there is a definite quantity of all the differences in the world.”<sup>3</sup> Speaking about a way to make sense of the African diaspora, I see his “Poetics of Relation” materialising throughout this piece that immerses itself into what Hannah Arendt calls the “space of appearance,” that is a space in the public sphere that is indispensable for one’s subjectivity to become inscribed, as it is only in this common ground where one leaves a mark of one’s actions and deeds and becomes visible to others.<sup>4</sup> I think of the historical, aesthetic and political valences of Blackness and how these leave their marks, even as insidious forms of anti-Blackness loom over these offerings, which is what the *125th and Freedom* ritual, performance, procession is trying to exorcise, or at least denounce.

You cannot passively encounter or immerse yourself in this ritual. They dance collectively with unison gestures and poses sometimes. In other instances, they improvise to a voice proclaiming how “Black is beautiful” or that we must “pray for the seven generations of mothers who have your back.” In New Orleans second-line fashion, they march down 125th Street with call and response. Passive looking cannot be the mode of relation here. Active looking in a firing of the sensorium. It is not about the eye/I. Immersion through “touching with our eyes” offers a mode of attunement to others; not an ultimate mode or a complete way of knowing, but an invitation to stop, consider and experience. Our bodies must immerse themselves into this to learn, play along, perform but always be ready and willing to improvise, to shift, to lose balance, to fall, to fail, to get up, to repeat, to breathe, to be with, to be in proximity, to be immersed. The community performing in *125th and Freedom* sing, chant, pray, play, summon up incantations to “gods we know [...] gods we don’t,” and occupy space by dancing and breathing boldly, collectively. It is through this collective invitation to immersion, or more specifically, immersive ritual, that they offer possibilities for resilience, endurance and love. So many different bodies participate in this ritual. Black bodies make up the majority, but I also see bodies of different hues dancing, praying, incanting and enchanting. Immersion

could even be transformative, for as Kaja Silverman tells us, “the eye can confer the active gift of love upon bodies which have long been accustomed to neglect and disdain.”<sup>5</sup> But here, it’s not just eyes that facilitate the immersion. Sound, vibrational frequencies and rhythmically sound-ing bodies gesturing and expanding their limbs work to make the immersion accessible in a variety of ways. Royona Mitra addresses these same processes in immersive dance theatre performances and considers how “decolonising immersion” activates our bodies to see beyond our eyes.<sup>6</sup> At the moment of this writing, I am thinking about a multi-sensorial activation of love despite the looking upon or experiencing of difference. I am trying to imagine beyond failed immersions or moments of incomprehension that still require love as an ethico-political commitment. When I watch *125th and Freedom*, I gaze lovingly on this ritual. I want to be immersed by it even though I am physically detached from it as I watch it after its initial performance and through media, not live. I am grateful for the conjure work I sense, for the embodied brujeria which we need more of.<sup>7</sup> This is a labor of love for Blackness, yes; but it bleeds into love for others, despite historical violences, defeats, and disappointments as well.

I would like to think that this gift of love is not a romantic conceit where the focus is on the supremacy of the couple that looks upon one another and confers value and acquiesces desire. Nor is it a love that forgives and forgets. Instead, love operates as a political tool, as a love ethic that valorizes our individual capacities to feel, move, and desire; a love where risk and adventure become part of the contract and where difference is celebrated as a point of unity, not departure. I’m indebted here to bell hooks and Alain Badiou for some of these musings, which I’d like to think model a way for epistemologies to work together to propel us to something different, or at least more equitable.<sup>8</sup> I see this happening in *125th and Freedom*. It is through this witnessing of ritual practice that *125th and Freedom* models the daily practices of immersion and love we must do and perfect in order to be immersed in a more just everyday.

What might be generative about these confrontations in difference? How can our immersions and attunements to embodied worldly ‘differences’ facilitate more productive and loving encounters? This immersion through the haptic in dance allows for a different kind of looking, one that is contemplative and multi-sensorial, one that “is not organised around identification” but rather moves between “identification and

immersion.”<sup>9</sup> Sometimes we may not identify with or want to simply categorise the Other we encounter; yet with our tactile sensory systems we can consider one another, perhaps even lovingly. Thus, *125th and Freedom* in its demonstration of Black relationality models the potential of ethico-political love for cross-racial encounters.

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## Notes

1. Joni L. Jones "Performance Ethnography: The Role of Embodiment in Cultural Authenticity," *Theatre Topics* vol. 12, no. 1 (2002): 14.
2. *125th and Freedom: Public Performance Ritual* (highlight reel) available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rXPt2wHzoE>
3. Édouard Glissant, Manthia Diawara, and Christopher Winks, "Édouard Glissant in Conversation with Manthia Diawara," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 28 (2011): 9.
4. Hannah Arendt cited in Cynthia Bodenhurst, "The Underskin of the Screen: Performing Embodiment in *Through the Looking Glass*, an Installation by Cris Bierrenbach," *e-misferica*, Sexualities and Politics in the Americas, vol. 2, issue 2 (2002); Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
5. Kaja Silverman, *Threshold of the Visible World* (New York & London: Routledge, 1996), 227.
6. Royona Mitra, "Decolonizing Immersion," *Performance Research*, vol. 21, no. 5 (2016): 89-100.
7. *Brujería* is a Spanish word for witchcraft or conjuring. I am thinking of this word from the perspective of those in the Black/Afro-Latinx diaspora who appreciate, respect and/or practice it.
8. bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000); Alain Badiou with Nicholas Truong, *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush (New York: New Press, 2012).
9. Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 189.

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