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Author

Williams, Alessandra

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MIXING PUPPETRY WITH ETHNOGRAPHY, part two

The “Fugitive” Terms of Contemporary Indian Dance

BY ALESSANDRA WILLIAMS

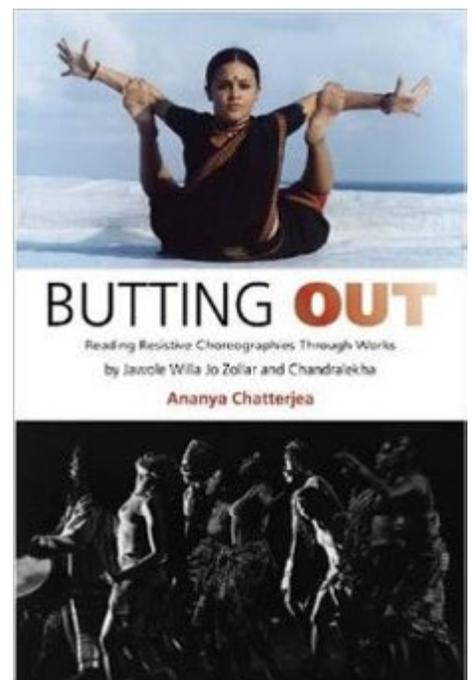
IN A PREVIOUS ARTICLE, “Mixing Puppetry with Ethnography,” (*CSW Update*, October, 2012), I examined the world premier of *Moreechika, Season of Mirage* by the primarily women of color dance company Ananya Dance Theater (ADT) in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. I concluded this essay by assessing the comments of ADT’s artistic director and choreographer Ananya Chatterjea, who posited that the term “contemporary” has been hijacked” or inaccessible to artists of color neglecting to follow the standards of Euro-American modern dance such as a pointed foot. Here, I start to foreground my contribution to Chatterjea’s ideas.

In *Butting Out: Reading Resistive Choreographies through Works by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, and Chandralekha* (Wesleyan, 2004), Chatterjea examines how the dance aesthetic of two women choreographers of color redirects the terms of “post-modern” from the mere presumption that only dance-makers invested in experimentation with Western mod-

ern forms establish the cutting-edge; rather, the dances of radically-inclined artists such as Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Chandralekha redefine the postmodern through progressive inquires into the techniques and cultural histories of communities of color. My dissertation follows a method of analyzing the dances of a choreographer of African descent and of South Asian descent by examining Chatterjea’s dances alongside the works of choreographer David Roussè. Specifically, artists Zollar and Roussè both focus on African American cultural histories and artists Chandralekha and Chatterjea both explore contemporary Indian aesthetics. However, while Chatterjea prefaces *Butting Out* by discussing her struggle to stage Indian aesthetics amidst failed norms of “East” and “West” in dance production, I locate my self-reflexivity within my earlier work as a woman community activist of African descent. Through such a lens, this essay begins to rethink Chatterjea’s interest in the “fugitive” terms of contemporary

dance amongst artists of color.

Ananya Chatterjea co-convenes the “Dancing Fugitive Futures” symposium in September of 2012 at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Chatterjea discusses ways of negotiating hierarchies in contemporary dance with artists Makeda Thomas, Michael Sakamoto, Santee Smith, Donald Byrd, Reggie Wilson, and co-Convener Thomas DeFrantz. In the opening comments,



Chatterjea suggested the concept of “contemporary” be dealt with by working “outside of Western dance” or being “contemporary without the Western,” albeit “there is not a lot of space for that to happen.” Offering demonstration for precisely how an artist best articulates the contemporary through Indian aesthetics, she references the choreography of Chandralekha who “manages to focus on deconstructing Bharatanatyam and finding contemporary dance language that spoke to contemporary realities.”

All the artists’ presentations reveal great complexity, yet symposium participants share a major concern for dancers of color. A dilemma surfaces in Santee Smith’s “inter-tribal” method in which she trains artists to do her work who are not necessarily from a culturally specific background. Chatterjea names the terms of Smith’s approach as not concerning itself with a simplistic hybridity or mere fusion of creative practices. Donald Byrd deepens the symposium’s inquiry into this issue of cultural particularity by wondering how to handle past works such as *The Minstrel Show*, which was originally staged in the early 1990s, as well as how to sustain persons of African descent in his company that is based in Seattle. To highlight the urgent need for long periods of time to make choreography, Chatterjea further deliberates on Smith and Byrd’s concern through discussing the problem of artists of color not being encouraged to work on their craft. A conversation about the relationship between dancers and choreographers peaks Reggie Wil-

son’s interest as an issue of power that he chooses to explore in his current work, the *Moses(es)* project, by posing questions about leadership and his relationship to dancers. Returning to cultural material as well as questioning the meaning of bodies navigating space leads Wilson to define his work as “post-African-neo-hoodoo-modern-dance,” though he has not yet succeeded in making his chosen category widely accepted. Through such polemic, Chatterjea suggests the work of radical artists of color is “fugitive” because it continues to change. Co-convenor Thomas DeFrantz defines the term “fugitive” as an escaped slave. “The script is on the wall,” says DeFrantz. Artists continue to reinvent themselves to escape “the future we have been scripted into,” posits Chatterjea. Favoring an effort to have knowledge of past events so that futures escape fugitive conditions, Chatterjea asks: how do we keep “ourselves running from the script of tradition” and “keep the next generation running with us?”

During the concluding remarks, DeFrantz recognizes my having been a dedicated witness throughout the conference proceedings and requests that I contribute some responses to the concerns raised by choreographers. I ask whether they may consider producing a shared objective on how dance passes down ongoing reconfigurations of historical legacies. Deeply embedded into my query about collective aims consists of training as a community organizer in which persons directly impacted by an issue establish a goal to be achieved. My proposal for the

symposium reenacts my own practice of utilizing the tools of activism that I first learned from my mother who was an organizer in the Phillips neighborhood of Minneapolis and that I extended through training and leadership as an adolescent peer educator in this same community. Later, dancing for ADT in 2008 while campaign coordinating for the HIRE Minnesota Coalition—which secured public dollars in support of renewable energy jobs for people of color—forged my interests in approaching dance through a lens of community activism. Such a method has critical implications for theorizing ADT’s work because, following the symposium, Chatterjea offers a presentation during the performances of *Morechika* in Philadelphia, in which she describes how the company began creating alliances with activists in Phillips in 2006 to connect dance to community activism—that is, to link up the artwork of raising questions with organizing goals in measurability and policy-making. I will offer a thorough account of this distinction between dance and community activism in another essay. In the following analysis, I seek a response to my query on collective objectives by, first, defining the terms of the contemporary through choreographer of color Ananya Chatterjea and, second, comprehending how her experimentation with contemporary Indian forms engenders its own aims to build solidarity with artists of color.

Chatterjea’s discussion of an earlier collaboration with DeFrantz helps to comprehend the “fugitive” as a shared initiative of contem-



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MAY 30, 2015

ADT dancers conduct field research for "Roktim" at St. Paul's Frogtown Farm

The dancers of Ananya Dance Theatre visited Frogtown Farm, near Minnehaha and Lexington avenues in St. Paul, May 30, as part of their research for the creation of Roktim: Nurture...



Ananya Dance Theatre is the leading creator of contemporary Indian dance in the global arts and social justice movement. Invoking the work and dreams of women of color, we radically reframe the ground on which we dance, inspiring our audiences through visual and emotional engagement.

porary choreographers of color, or negotiating a struggle to sustain those dancers who are equipped with technique qualifications and radical politics so that their choreographic works continuously recreate aesthetic traditions. Two months after the symposium, I interviewed Chatterjea about her choreography for ADT and she recalled constructing the piece titled *Encounters with DeFrantz*. To bring into fruition her initial interest in learning how a gay African American man and a South Asian woman meet across difference, she had to navigate musical challenges during their rehearsals. Chatterjea remembers deciding with DeFrantz to follow percussionist Akili Jamal Haynes's "one"—that

is, the recurring beat determined by this musician—because she and DeFrantz consistently failed to meet each other's "one." These choreographers decided to maintain a "three-ring circle of listening," which consisted of Haynes's "one," DeFrantz's "four," and her "three." Chatterjea calls this effort an act of "multiple listening," in which she found a tangible approach to meet an artist who identified differently in terms of race, gender, and sexuality. DeFrantz and Chatterjea integrated an auditory practice based on attentiveness to the other's rhythm. This awareness that was constructed as a result of solidarity built a foundation from which Chatterjea created artistic intersections across different

Ananya Dance Theater describes itself as "a professional, contemporary Indian dance company comprised of women artists of color. We describe ourselves as cultural activists, working through dance and artistic processes to engage audiences, build community, and move towards justice and beauty." Their website is <http://www.ananyadancetheatre.org>.

racial ideologies with women artists of African descent.

One day before the symposium, DeFrantz facilitates the audience "talk back" on September 9 following an ADT performance of *Moreechika, Season of Mirage*. DeFrantz asks that Chatterjea discuss the music in *Moreechika* and she asks for further

elaboration from her collaborator Laurie Carlos who had been co-conceiver of *Moreechika*. Carlos describes the ADT artists as well as collaborators, including those of European descent, who contributed to the vocal composition and poetic narrative. Carlos had been the original composer of the “Lady in Blue” persona from *For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf* in its earliest renditions in the 1970s. Whereas the previous analysis of the symposium reveals how co-conveners DeFrantz and Chatterjea find new ways of intersecting through critical listening, my interview with Carlos illuminates how differences in racial ideologies coalesce in dance.

Chatterjea’s objective to create space for diverse women dancers of color to move together originates in the concern she explicates during the symposium about aiming for persons of color to meet one another without having to “pass through whiteness in order to meet each other,” or having to be grounded in Euro-American ballet, modern, or a postmodern experimental form to dance together. Carlos does not share Chatterjea’s concern for white supremacy because she comprehends such ideologies as a “myth” that “has no real power unless you internalize it.” Some relation between their alternative perspectives develops when considering Frantz Fanon’s (1963: 250) postulate that the oppressed struggle against subordination by being aware of how to put an end to the fallacies implanted in their personality by colonialism. Carlos’s admittance that white suprem-

acy “exists in terms of institutional” problems, but refusal to “believe in it” or allow herself to “live racially,” supports Fanon’s aims for the colonized to resist incorporating certain ideas into their consciousness. Using Fanon to explicate the differences between Chatterjea and Carlos brings forth the nuances involved in how artists of color position themselves against white supremacist ideologies. It is Chatterjea’s vision for a woman of color dance company that responds to Fanon’s concluding thoughts about colonized peoples creating a new history that does not draw upon European institutions but rather focuses on building and making new discoveries on humanity. Though maintaining a distinct position as an artist of color seeking to inquire into contemporary structures of oppression, Chatterjea acknowledges the role played by Carlos when ADT began incorporating women artists of European descent and a gay, male artist of African descent into the company. During post-*Moreechika* discussions, Chatterjea informs audiences that Carlos “has given me the courage to move forward in this journey” because few dancers can do the extensive ADT research that requires deep spiritual, emotional, and mental labor.

In the following month, dialogues enacted by Chatterjea as well as dancers during ADT’s tour of *Moreechika* in Philadelphia in October clarify the kind of study the company requires. During an open lecture at Temple University on October 5, Chatterjea describes ADT artists as “cultural activists” through their research on unknown,

hidden, and suppressed histories. From Chatterjea’s description of dancers’ investigations, founding company member Hui Wilcox, an artist in ADT since its beginning in 2004, uses the questions and answers session to insert a conversation about the conflict endured by dancers who carry out the necessary research and still struggle to remain grounded in community. In response, Chatterjea suggests that dancers share each other’s stories to create a Global South alliance in which artists enact a transnationalism that refuses to be divided from one another’s experiences.

Two days following Chatterjea’s lecture, Wilcox further describes her understanding of a cultural activist method that inquires into the culturally and nationally diverse stories of ADT artists. In my interview with Wilcox during the Philadelphia staging of *Moreechika*, she offered insight into how she engaged with the shadow puppets that I had been projecting on the wall during performances. These hungry ghosts had extended bellies that signified the physical results of starvation or suffering from ingesting unhealthy food for Wilcox whose grandmother had endured multiple famines in China, and following that period, had stored bags of grain, rice, and flour in fear of another. Through this history, Wilcox constructed a story for how she might exist as a hungry ghost: “I had this narrative to myself. I am a hungry ghost. Reincarnated in different forms. In [the section of *Moreechika*] ‘Almost Gone,’ I’m wrapped in plastic. My tongue—capitalism—clogged in a

machine. We are a hungry ghost. So I try to connect those pieces.” As Wilcox’s two daughters sat with me while I rehearsed with the hungry ghosts in preparation for Philadelphia performances, they observed and occasionally demonstrated their own ideas about how to maneuver puppets. From discussing how this play with the figures sparks her children’s interest, Wilcox dreams for her children to “have a community, a real community, of real women,” because “my kids are my future—that’s also part of healing.” By describing how the hungry ghosts resonate with her familial history as well as her daughters, Wilcox shows how cultural activism participates in M. Jacqui Alexander’s concept of “The Crossing” as a metaphor of the Middle Passage and those enslaved Africans who were disembodied and the experiences they might be still longing to articulate. Alexander discusses ways of recreating such histories of disembodiment to encourage living relationally—or as Wilcox frames it, to heal from a past of physical degradation to meet diverse women across difference. Through artists such as Wilcox, choreographers of color negotiate the fugitive terms of contemporary dance by carrying out the research necessary to enact “The Crossing” or to reinvent the past traditions, aesthetics, and culturally based histories of the historically disenfranchised.

Such rigorous engagement with cultural histories as a dancer of color provides the research building blocks to support the architecture of Chatterjea’s politicized experimen-

tation with Indian dance. Chatterjea expresses her aims to “deconstruct the sari on her body” as a result of the past conditions in which classical aesthetics were formed in post-colonial India. During the introductory statements at the symposium, she broadly refers to the major historical ruptures that constructed classical dance. In terms of the Odissi form, prominent gurus such as Kelucharan Mohapatra, dance practitioners such as Sanjukta Panigrahi, and scholars such as Kalicharan Patnaik formed the Jayantika project that created a standard Odissi technique in 1957. Wondering about how her expression of the contemporary diverges from this historical meeting between artists and scholars that developed a classical script for Odissi, she poses the question about what it means to “claim a radical space” in which the merging of realities into an ideal beauty or the presentation of form as having a seamless history is replaced with a choreographer’s direct address to internal hierarchies of gender and class so that relationships across difference can be discovered. Chatterjea’s claim to the title “contemporary Indian dance” emerges as a call for contemporary choreographers of color to share her objective to situate themselves within fugitive conditions—that is, a radical postmodern dance practice in which choreographers transcend cultural limitations by building solidarity with artists inquiring into the aesthetic forms of communities of color and the cultural activist research of their dancers.



Alessandra Williams (shown above) is a Ph.D. student in Culture and Performance in the Department of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA. She received a CSW Travel Grant in 2014 to support her research.