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FIELD REPORT FROM TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO BY ALESSANDRA WILLIAMS

MIXING PUPPETRY WITH ETHNOGRAPHY AT THE ANANYA DANCE THEATRE

On Tuesday, July 17, I boarded a plane destined for Trinidad and Tobago with a carry-on bag full of “hungry ghosts.” I am the puppeteer for Ananya Dance Theatre (ADT), a contemporary dance company created by Ananya Chatterjea with the aim of discussing sustainable solutions to the social and economic crises that impact communities of color. Placing the hungry ghosts beneath the seat in front of me only seems to deepen my uneasiness about the task before me: I must animate these five creatures, whose outstretched tongues, spooked mouths, and protruding bellies are representations of an insatiable hunger and thirst described in Tibetan mythology. Most pressingly, I am the

sole manipulator of these figures for the world premiere of ADT’s work *Moreechika: Season of Mirage*. Since its founding in 2004 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the Ananya Dance Theatre has presented an annual piece that examines the everyday experiences of historically disadvantaged people, with a particular focus on the environmental challenges women of color face across the globe. Journeying to the Caribbean marks an unprecedented opportunity because ADT will debut *Moreechika* at the National Academy for the Performing Arts in Trinidad on July 27.

Sneaking a gaze at the artists of ADT seated just a few rows behind me makes me ponder how I came to be voyaging alongside these

dancers who have worked for nearly a year to construct a dance production about the human costs of oil extraction. While I serve as the company’s traveling puppeteer, I am also a Ph.D. student in Culture and Performance at UCLA seeking to make my summer experiences a primary subject of my M.A. thesis. Through my work as a puppeteer and a researcher, I am engaging with the ethnographic method of participant observation in order to analyze how ADT’s work creates an important conversation about culture. Additionally, my puppetry allows me to satisfy an ethical requirement of ethnography, which requires that I must contribute to the daily lives of the individuals I am studying. Although my presence

provides fundamental support to the company's work, I am fully aware that my actual entrance into this particular community of dancers relies less on my becoming the puppeteer and more on my past roles as audience member and dancer. Since viewing ADT's first production, *Bandh: A Meditation on Dream*, in 2005, I have been an audience member in four of the company's seven performances and a dancer in *Pipaashaa: Extreme Thirst* (2007) and *Ashesh Barsha: Unending Monsoon* (2009). As a result, I have gained an insider's understanding of their work. More specifically, my ongoing involvement with the company has provided me with the opportunity to interrogate my own research ideas. I speculate that Chatterjea's choreography articulates traditional and classical movement differently in order to reimagine the social and political possibilities of dance in the contemporary. As the jet crosses the Caribbean Sea, I am enthusiastic about how my research with Ananya Dance Theatre in Trinidad will lead me to confirm or disconfirm my current hypothesis.

It is eight o'clock in the morning in Port of Spain. I haul out the day's necessities: banana, granola snack, water bottle, composition notebook, pens, scented oil perfume, Trinidad and Tobago monies, along with a roller bag filled with hungry ghosts and a brand-new projector. I bob my head, tap my toes, and swing my torso to the hip-hop dance-hall

reggae rhythms that boom through the state-of-the-art sound system of master transporter Biggie's shuttle bus during the five-minute drive to the National Academy for the Performing Arts (NAPA), where I will have a full day of activities at the New Waves Dance & Performance Institute. Choreographer and educator Makeda Thomas organized the Institute to present the commissioned works—*Palm Oil Rosary* by Chris Walker and *Moreechika* by Ananya Dance Theatre—and to observe what can emerge when fifty artists converse about and embody contemporary dance from sun up to sundown for two weeks.

I mull over the course of my day: Should I start by working on abdominal strength in Dyane Harvey-Salaam's Pilates class or revive by dripping sweat in Walker's Caribbean dance class? I definitely must take on the refreshing fusion of ballet and Caribbean repertoire in Makeda Thomas's contemporary dance class. I consider whether I can hold off on lunch to exercise the fullest flexing, popping, and stretching capacity of my limbs in Rennie Harris's house dance class at noon. With only an hour to eat, I'll powerwalk down the street to devour a vegetarian roti overflowing with sweet mango chunks and lined with spicy pepper sauce. Hopefully, a stuffed belly will provide me with the sustenance needed to make yet another decision: contemporary African dance technique in Dyane Harvey Salaam's "Forces of Nature"

class or Ras-Mikey C's "Ethio-modern" class? In need of a meditative and cleansing break, I imagine that I can squeeze in fifteen minutes to stretch my soon-to-be weary ligaments before Tony Hall's folk workshop series in the afternoon. At the end of the day, during rehearsal with my ADT comrades, I will be able to use the puppets I have lugged around all day.

By 6 pm, I've discovered ways to initiate movement from my tailbone with Chris, engaged the versatility of my hips with Makeda, increased the fluidity and strength of my legs with Rennie, discovered an ability for opposition in my arms and torso with Dyane, and, after forging a few restorative moments to reclaim my breath, spent nearly two hours immersed in the "Jouvay process." Tony Hall facilitates this method using improvisation, theatre, and self-narration in order to help participants make critical discoveries about the significance of folklore in their daily lives. Carrying long wooden sticks, we march in a tightly enclosed circle, halt at the sound of each other's unified growl to stand on firmly grounded feet, and meet the gaze of the person opposite us to challenge that rivaling combatant to a duel. After spending two hours accessing our inner warrior, he asks us to activate the next stage of the Jouvay strategy: personal storytelling. Although I am now battling complete exhaustion, somehow the

task appears less insurmountable when he notes that sharing stories best constitutes the work of mythology because it is the continuous reconstruction of archetypes from the past that helps us to effectively comprehend the political and social representations in the present. In short, mythology is a creative procedure that we can employ to make concrete connections between historical experience and contemporary reality.

Rehearsal commences at 7:15 pm. I stand with my weight on my bent right leg, hip thrust out, left foot planted diagonally forward, torso in a half-moon shape, and gaze toward the image of a flower being shaped by my left fingertips. We warm up in *tribhangi*, a footwork position that originates from the classical Indian dance genre known as Odissi. When choreographing for ADT, Chatterjea reconstructs the standard motifs that make up Odissi, yoga, and the Indian martial art form Chhau in order to train dancers in a movement aesthetic that transcends the boundaries of rigid, traditional aesthetics. We shift out of the *tribhangi* stance by lifting our elbows into the firm rectangular shape of *chaukha*—another position derived from Odissi—and I begin looking out at my colleagues for some help in ignoring the advancing discomfort in my triceps. Observing the other dancers' unwavering perseverance not only sends a jolt of stamina through my shoulder blades but

also directs my consciousness to the recurring symbols ADT artists engage on a daily basis. Embodying Chatterjea's revision of traditional choreography deepens my eagerness to give definite form to the insight from my experience in the Jouway process.

After balancing in one-legged poses and igniting yogic breaths in extended lunge stretches to complete the warm-up, dancers run through each piece of *Morechika*, in which their dancing bodies illustrate how global oil consumption and manufacturing affects communities of color. In "Almost Gone," Alexandra Eady carefully wraps herself in a large black plastic tarp to show the kind of physical displacement survivors experienced after the 1984 gas pipeline disaster in Bhopal, India. In "Vision," Sherie Apungu and Ananya Chatterjea frame their alarmed eyes with two pointed fingers, drawing the audience's attention to the environmental devastations women of color witness in their communities. In "Chakravuyha," each member of the ensemble form an intricate spiral without any conscious awareness of the role played by each other; their movement depicts the mindless labor that human agents undertake in a capitalist-structured economy. In "Bird," Chitra Vairavan's shaky balance, backbends, and lifeless hand gestures personify the life of a helpless creature submerged in petroleum after the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. In "Plastic

Desire," Orlando Hunter dons a plastic sari to illustrate the complex position of authority held by corporate women leaders such as Maria das Graças Foster, who leads Brazil's state-controlled petroleum company. In "Nightmare," Rose Huey turns her back from the neatly packed ensemble, her shuddering arms foreshadowing how individual competitive actions may lead humans to nearly poke their own eyes out. At the end of "Progress," Sarah Beck-Esmay rises from a scuffle of rolling dancers to be the harbinger of hyperglamour, which shows how the quest for good looks can effectively bewitch us to the point of insanity. In "Beauty," Hui Niu Wilcox prances gracefully around the stage, carrying flowing fabric made of plastic while entirely oblivious to the black lipstick splattered on her face; she illuminates the stupor that might emerge when humans apply petroleum-lined cosmetics to adorn their physique. In "Game," Brittany Radke reminds spectators of a young Kichwa woman in Ecuador currently battling cancer as she rolls over the backs of dancers who completely ignore her terminal condition. In "Tremors of Spring," Lela Pierce paces worrisomely across the stage until she balances steadily in a precarious one-legged position, signaling the need to move beyond merely predicting oncoming environmental devastation, to actively resisting such destruction alongside our neighboring community

members. In “Anchuri!” Renée Copeland re-engages that inner fighter we provoked with the Jouway method by marching courageously onstage, firmly planting her feet, crossing her hands behind her back, and maintaining a fixed gaze outward toward an impinging enemy: she reminds us of Kichwa women and children who fought to protect their land from encroaching oil corporations in 2003. In “Blinding Storm,” I maneuver the puppets into position: each gazes out momentarily at the dancers onstage who bury themselves deeper into a storm of flying rice, and then one by one the hungry ghosts teeter across the screen until their bulging bellies become invisible. I steer them in this manner with the aim of revealing mythical linkages between past and present. In “Occupy,” audience members crowd the stage alongside dancers to participate in forming constellations out of the fallen rice; they become images of the 99% who can grapple collectively for a fair share of wealth and economic sustainability.

At the end of the rehearsal, we sweep up the rice that covers every corner of the stage. I am now participating in my fourth consecutive week of meticulous rice-gathering that follows every full run-through. I manage to find a smidgen of enjoyment in the ritual when I concentrate on my favorite *Moreechika* section: “Anchuri!” I can hardly fathom the spectator who resists the awe-inspiring effects

of those sharp flexed feet and claw-like fingertips from Chhau or those grounded warrior stances and precisely outstretched arms from yoga that seem to effectively annihilate any trace of a potentially threatening outsider. I recall Chatterjea’s reaction when she witnessed my “Anchuri!” enthusiasm for the umpteenth time: “Do the work, Alessandra! Write that auto-ethnography.” Putting aside my woes about having procrastinated the task Chatterjea has assigned, I take pleasure in the fact that my deep immersion in the Jouway process has restored my motivation. More specifically, understanding how archetypes contribute to building knowledge about our everyday existence has re-energized my interests in writing about the relationship between “Anchuri!” and my personal experience. After helping to gather up the last remnants of rice, I pack up the hungry ghosts and climb onto Biggie’s shuttle bus to retire for the night.

Following a week of dancing for over eight hours a day, our schedule continues with roundtable discussions on Saturdays, a weekly event that prevents us from lounging in bed as we would like. Although we stumble into these conversations gulping down coffee and sweetened orange juice in order to rouse from sleepiness, these dialogues provide an important opportunity for exploring the political and social implications of our dancing. Chatterjea is the facilitator of these exchanges,

and she has titled the first roundtable “Contemporary Dance at Home and Abroad: The Global Village.” Crowding underneath the shade provided by the small rooftop, we sit in a circle nibbling on cream-filled pastries and exchanging amusing tales about the back-breaking walks and high-priced cab rides. Our immersion in the hilarity of our stories does not prepare us for Chatterjea’s opening remarks: “The term ‘contemporary’ has been hijacked.” As my eyes dart back and forth across the room to catch people’s reactions, she continues by describing how the word “suggests I must use the West in order to arrive at a contemporary place.” The scowls that had formed on foreheads soften from shock to intrigue when Chatterjea asserts that “in a world ruled by globality,” we can work against the restraints of flattened, universal categories of movement. Suggesting that we revise the diverse ways of moving that are deeply rooted in communities of color across the globe in order to understand how human agents must negotiate the context of their citizenship in everyday life, Chatterjea’s choreography is an act of reinventing that is empowering because she works against the process of simply reiterating traditional motifs and toward the transcendence of the rigid boundaries of classical dance vocabularies. In short, Ananya Dance Theatre is deeply engaged in acts of cultural discovery.