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Lived Experience:

The Choreographies of Ananya Chatterjea and David Rousève

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Culture and Performance

by

Alessandra Lebea Williams

2013

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2013

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Lived Experience:

The Choreographies of Ananya Chatterjea and David Roussève

by

Alessandra Lebea Williams

Master of Arts in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Allen Fraleigh Roberts, Chair

This paper shows how Ananya Chatterjea and David Roussève reinterpret their lived experiences to create choreographies about the politics of diaspora on the concert dance stage. I examine how Chatterjea's reconstruction of "classical" Indian dance forms becomes the artistic foundation of her company Ananya Dance Theatre. I analyze how Roussève reinterprets an African American blues music "tradition" to construct the thematic framework of his company REALITY. As their choreographies cross boundaries of culture, race, nation, and sexuality, I argue that their work reveals the complex histories of diasporic communities. Additionally, this paper uses the autoethnographic method to discuss how these choreographers helped me to analyze cross-cultural engagement as a collective inquiry into lived experiences. A video of the performance I created from this particular research is included as supplementary material.

The thesis of Alessandra Lebea Williams is approved.

Shana Redmond

Mary Nooter Roberts

David Delgado Shorter

Allen Fraleigh Roberts, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2013

To my mother,
family, and
teachers:

I am filled with gratitude.
I hope that I make you proud.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

1. Video: *An Exploration of Land, Narrative, and Performance* (2013) by Alessandra Williams

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Granny: the extended moment of silence that we shared continues to give me peace. Let us keep talking...

Introduction

This paper theorizes embodiment practice through the choreographies of Ananya Chatterjea and David Roussève. Chatterjea is from Kolkata, West Bengal, India. She is a Professor of dance studies in the Department of Theatre Arts and Dance at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities and the artistic director of her company Ananya Dance Theatre (ADT). Chatterjea's own history of dance training in the Indian forms of Odissi dance, yoga, and Chhau martial arts became the foundation of ADT's artistic aesthetic. Since 2004, Chatterjea began choreographing for ADT, a company of dancers from diverse cultural, racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds. David Roussève is from Houston, Texas. He is a Professor of choreography in the Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance at the University of California, Los Angeles and the artistic director of his company REALITY. Roussève's family histories of labor in Louisiana became the thematic context of his early creative work. Since 1989, Roussève has choreographed for the multiethnic company REALITY.

What is Lived Experience?

I define "embodiment practice" as choreographies of lived experience that work across boundaries. In *The Poverty of Theory*, E. P. Thompson describes how historical knowledge develops through a rigorous engagement with methods and theories in order to create a particular structure of ideas.¹ Part of the raw material being examined in such scientific methods is the category of "experience," a practice that emerges spontaneously within social existence but with reflection as persons think rationally about what is taking place in their world.² In *Pedagogies of Crossing*, M. Jacqui Alexander describes embodiment as a critical focus on the "lived experience" of persons across the world.³ She shows how we "cross" the imaginative constraints of exploitation and subordination by engaging practices that enable us to live in relationality with

one another.⁴ As Chatterjea and Roussève choreograph lived experiences, they produce a cross-cultural, intersubjective framework.

Their artistic work explores how persons negotiate complex, social challenges in their communities. In *Reading Dancing*, Susan Leigh Foster examines how viewing a dance piece becomes a practice of reading a pattern of choreographic perspectives that invent and reveal what a dance means.⁵ Chatterjea and Roussève make choreographic decisions through an analysis and interpretation of their own experiences. Ananya Chatterjea's Indian dance training is the movement base of her choreography. David Roussève's heritage in the US South constitutes the broader subject matter of his performance work. Chatterjea engages personal experiences through form, whereas Roussève uses his family history as content. As the creative methods of these two choreographers prioritize a critical inquiry into lived experience, they make choreography that focuses on the stories of the historically disenfranchised.

Why Ananya Chatterjea and David Roussève?

Although demonstrating the different ways that personal histories can be explored in choreography, both of their creative processes are broadly associated with a particular method known as autoethnography. In *Autoethnography as Method*, Heewon Chang argues that researchers can collect and formulate data from their personal experience for the purposes of analyzing and interpreting cultural phenomena.⁶ This method must not be understood as mere self-analysis, because autoethnography exceeds the constraints of individualized narration by employing personal stories for investigation and cultural inquiry.⁷ Chatterjea's analysis of her cultural relationship to histories of Indian dance and Roussève's interpretation of his family's histories both enable the creation of choreographies that explore the social and political realities of diasporic communities.

These choreographers' artistic works connect with the lived experiences of diasporic persons in the United States. "Diaspora" is a far-reaching term deployed to explain the histories of voluntary and forced migrations across the globe. In *Theorizing Diaspora*, Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur define the term "diaspora," above all else, as a reference to the lived experiences of persons residing outside a country of origin.⁸ Moreover, these authors describe how diasporas must be examined interdisciplinarily through a discussion of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.⁹ Reconstructing the Indian movement aesthetics she trained in since her childhood, Chatterjea investigates the systemic violences, environmental injustices, and economic challenges women face across the globe. Using African American stories to construct artistic pieces that speak through histories of labor in the American South, Roussève makes multimedia productions that explore the relationship between race, sexuality, and the experiences of persons living with HIV/AIDS.

How Will Their Work be Analyzed?

This paper is organized into three chapters. In chapter one, I examine how David Roussève recreates his family histories in the American South for his company REALITY. His use of dance, music, and theatre shows how an interdisciplinary framework can be employed to link past memories with current experiences of race, sexuality, and systemic violence. In particular, he unearths the gaps and hybridity of an African American blues performance "tradition" by offering different ideas about radical black practices in the American South and reinventing connections to histories of labor, sharecropping, and lynching. I examine how Roussève reinterprets blues aesthetics through three productions. I discuss the complex conventions linked to song, movement, and narrative in *Urban Scenes/Creole Dreams* (1993). I analyze the politics of embodiment in *The Whispers of Angels* (1995). I explore how he transforms his practices of working with music for *Love Songs* (1998). In the last section of this

chapter, I examine how Roussève's film *Two Seconds After Laughter* (2012) illuminates the lived experiences of diasporic groups through visuals of dance labor.

In chapter two, I examine how Ananya Chatterjea continuously reexamines her longtime, rigorous training in Indian dance forms for her company Ananya Dance Theatre in order to stage the connection between diverse racial, cultural, national, and ethnic groups. Chatterjea experiments within the multilayered, artistic and social possibilities of "classical" Indian dance. I analyze how she restructures such movement aesthetics in three productions. I discuss how she collaborated with community activists to create *Pipaashaa, Extreme Thirst* (2007). I examine how she built artistic alliances to make *Daak, Call to Action* (2008). I explore how she transformed her own ideas about the politics linked to the lives of women of color to produce the choreography for *Ashesh Barsha, Unending Monsoon* (2009). In the final section of this chapter, I examine how audiences could participate in *Moreechika, Season of Mirage* (2012) because of how Ananya Chatterjea choreographed movement through her reconfiguration of Indian dance.

In chapter three, I use the autoethnographic method to examine how I engaged with my own history through creative processes. I explore how a performance I developed allowed me to reinterpret my family's memories through collaborative work. Moreover, I discuss how I began to understand the ways that embodiment could provide a space for different diasporic histories to meet. These analyses will illuminate the theory of cross-cultural engagement that I outline in the beginning of this particular chapter.

Chapter One: The Choreographic Work of David Roussève

In this chapter, I examine David Roussève's choreographies. First, I discuss how his experiences in art and politics led him to explore how multimedia performance work might examine the complexities of social consciousness. This section illuminates how a blues music "tradition" must be comprehended as a creative and socially engaged epistemology. Second, I examine three of Roussève's artistic productions: *Urban Scenes/Creole Dreams* (1993), *The Whispers of Angels* (1995), and *Love Songs* (1998). I analyze each of these works in separate sections to reveal how a continuous transformation of the blues can explore the stories of diverse communities. I start my analysis of these choreographies by framing the broader significance of that particular section. Last, I examine *Saudade* (2009) and *Two Seconds After Laughter* (2012) to discuss how Roussève's choreography crosses different diasporic contexts. As part of my analysis in the following sections, I examine how dance critics describe Roussève's work.

The Blues "Tradition"

In this section, I use two descriptions of the "blues tradition" to explore how David Roussève's understandings of art and politics are integral to the interdisciplinary framework of his choreographic work. The first is Leroi Jones's (Amiri Baraka) description of how blues work songs established rhythms connected to physical labor.¹⁰ The second is Clyde Woods's concept of "blues epistemology" as "an aesthetic tradition" used by African American laborers to conceptualize the social and economic power dynamics of the southern plantation.¹¹ I expand these analyses by examining the role of a cross-cultural framework in reconfiguring a blues music tradition. This section analyzes how the sharecropping labor of Roussève's grandmother became integral to the broader subject matter of his choreographies that express diasporic histories on the concert dance stage.

From childhood through post-undergraduate education experiences, David Roussève was immersed in diverse artistic and political practices. In Houston, Texas, his mother enrolled him and his siblings in dance classes at Alvin Ailey Theatre to introduce them to “everything” and dance “was just one of those things” as he also acted in children’s theatre from the age of five.¹² Roussève’s mother created an environment in which dance practices became part of the many elements impacting his intellectual growth. His mother’s early insistence on his exposure to a variety of educational influences enabled Roussève’s upbringing to be integral to the interdisciplinary framework he would develop in his choreographic work. Interdisciplinarity can be defined as the merging of different methods for the purposes of responding to a social, economic, and/or political challenge in a particular community. Roussève’s mother planted these early seeds of interdisciplinarity through enrolling him in activities such as dance and theatre, and he would use these forms to explore the social issues linked to his lived experiences.

The stories told by his grandmother also helped to develop his interdisciplinary ideas. Roussève grew up listening to his maternal grandmother’s stories about being a sharecropper in Louisiana.¹³ Deepening his artistic experiences of dance and theatre with such storytelling narratives can be understood as an increased focus on the politics of the working class. Clyde Woods describes the blues epistemology as an African American custom passed down generations that accounts for contemporary realities and future changes.¹⁴ The narratives of Roussève’s grandmother were linked to the knowledge framework of the blues because of the musical form’s function as a black storytelling “tradition” that illuminates the conditions of black economic thought, offers a critique of plantation structure, and reveals the impact of labor experiences on African American livelihood.

Roussève endured a series of racial and social challenges while being educated in a

recently integrated high school and while attending a prestigious university, yet he found ways to engage with artistic work as he negotiated these conditions. Growing up during the Brown vs. Board of Education period in which schools were being racially desegregated, he became only one of a dozen African American students to graduate from a high school of over 700 graduates. He decided to accept his admission into Princeton University, in part, because of the school's close proximity to the arts scene in New York City.¹⁵ In the beginning of his undergraduate experience, he endured a kind of "culture shock" because he felt disconnected from campus activities that catered to students of elite backgrounds.¹⁶ In spite of these social discomforts, he located an interdisciplinary position in the larger community's extracurricular activities: he participated in the People's Front for the Liberation of South Africa and the Third World Center; he worked closely with dance teacher Ze'eva Cohen who opened a whole new world of dance to him; and he became a founding member of the student dance company *Expressions*.¹⁷ He negotiated social challenges using artistic and political involvement.

Roussève's interests in exploring the interdisciplinary possibilities of the arts reached a critical turning point in his post-collegiate career. He graduated Magna Cum Laude in 1981, majoring in pre-law with additional certificates in African studies and theatre and dance and was admitted into the law schools of Columbia and New York University.¹⁸ He decided against enrolling in these institutions in order to perform with Jean Erdman's Theatre, a company that bridged all different types of art forms.¹⁹ Although he chose creativity as a tool through which social issues might be expressed, how this decision continued to be linked to his interests in political engagement would be revealed when he became a choreographer.

As an art-maker, Roussève began to forge an inextricable relationship between the arts and social realities. He enjoyed dancing, but he needed to begin choreographing to explore his

own ideas about connecting a “social consciousness” to dance.²⁰ In New York City, his production of dance-theatre works became an opportunity for him to bridge the humorous, comedic side of himself.²¹ Moreover, his multimedia approach was fueled by his frustrations with the contemporary dance world in which creative, abstract work could neglect to associate with everyday social realities.²² Roussève’s choreographic process emerged as any other author’s might: by writing according to his own knowledge.²³ In particular, he began to produce work that reflected his personal history as well as his interests in discussing social issues through highly artistic work.²⁴ Constructing stories about HIV/AIDS, the lived experiences of gay men, and his memories of his grandmother, he brought together black storytelling, surreal imagery, and a nonlinear structure.²⁵ Through dance and theatre, his artwork became an interdisciplinary tool to create work about historical and contemporary experiences.

Describing him as both a choreographer as well as a writer, critics associate his dance-theatre works with a particular type of writing that examines everyday life in the black diaspora. For instance, critic Robert Johnson described Roussève as a “storyteller turned choreographer.”²⁶ Additionally, Deborah Jowitt posited that he was a “wonderfully clever writer.”²⁷ In her book *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Audre Lorde coins the term “biomythography”²⁸ in order to construct a series of narratives that discuss her parental lineage in the Caribbean and her experiences and relationships in America and abroad. *LA Weekly* described how Roussève created work that reflected Audre Lorde’s biomythography because he used personal history and family memories to create performance work.²⁹ Furthermore, Sara Wolf examined how he was a pioneer in “biomythographical dance theater” as he deployed his own histories to articulate the power of reconciliation.³⁰ Roussève’s work became linked to the work of biomythography

because he recreated memories to discuss the role of personal experience in provoking questions about social experiences.

These associations that critics made between Roussève's choreography and biomythography also revealed how his work challenged understandings of race and ethnicity. In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy describes how creative work can unsettle rigid and universal perceptions of ethnicity and nationality. For example, he examines how novels that illustrate a shared uneasiness about participating in the recreation and preservation of historical memory can reveal the complex and dynamic processes of memory.³¹ As Roussève recreated his own experiences through choreography, he worked against universal categories and prioritized a discussion of how identities and cultures are continuously recreated. Through dance and theatrical performance, Roussève explored the complexities of social life in the black diaspora in a framework that resisted rigid notions of nationalism and ethnicity.

Roussève's interdisciplinary performance work expressed the role of lived experiences in an increasingly globalized world. Reacting to critics who spoke uncritically about the "autobiographical framework" of some of his earlier work, he responded that the point was not to speak solely of identity, but to use the self as a beginning structure from which to transcend the dynamics of personal experience.³² His former teacher Ze'eva Cohen argued that by starting with identity, Roussève created work as an American artist who provided a method to understand cultural issues during the contemporary context of globalization.³³ Arjun Appadurai argues against the notion that the modern world is characterized through simplistic memory politics and rather describes the present moment as a sea of "cultural scenarios."³⁴ Globalization requires comprehension of how individuals and communities imagine their worlds locally and globally, as mediated by different financial, ideological, ethnic, technological, and electronic media

landscapes.³⁵ Furthermore, as Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur suggest that globalization can be understood by discussing how diasporic identities are enacted, lived, and experienced,³⁶ Roussève reveals the complex ways individuals imagine their existence within the broader forces of globalization.

As Roussève developed an interdisciplinary method to convey the complexities of social consciousness, his choreography also produced an intersubjective framework that rearticulated past experiences in order to make sense of contemporary life. In 1989, Roussève founded REALITY, a multiethnic company that received three commissioned works from the Brooklyn Academy of Music: *Urban Scenes/Creole Dreams* (1993), *The Whispers of Angels* (1995), and *Love Songs* (1998). These three productions culminated in the Dream Series trilogy that exemplified his major contributions to the American dance world. In particular, his highly successful multimedia method spoke to issues of race and social experience during a period in avant-garde New York in which largely white and European works dominated the artistic environment.³⁷ The Dream Series also illuminated M. Jacqui Alexander's discussion of how an inquiry into the memories of slaves whom were historically disenfranchised and racially subjugated, might also destabilize the rigid binaries that characterize the contemporary world.³⁸ Through his interdisciplinary framework of dance, music, and theatre, Roussève's Dream Series trilogy articulated experiences of race, sexuality, and gender in America.

Conventions: *Urban Scenes/Creole Dreams* (1993)

This section examines how Roussève worked through personal histories and experiences in *Urban Scenes/Creole Dreams* in order to unsettle ways of understanding genealogy and tradition. First, I examine the role of song in the piece so that I can discuss how Roussève used musical traditions to frame his artistic production within the context of African American histories. Second, I explore how the use of movement in *Urban Scenes/Creole Dreams* raised questions about how Roussève worked within and against choreographic conventions. Last, I posit that Roussève's inquiry into personal history enabled him to develop a voice of authority about how traditions in the black diaspora must be reinterpreted to dismantle certain misrecognitions.

In *Urban Scenes/Creole Dreams*, Roussève examined the politics of race in the Jim Crow South, HIV/AIDS, and sexuality. Through stories of his grandmother Thelma Arceneaux, his first day of school in Houston, and his relationship with his pet rat, he explored sexual assault, revenge, and the intimate lives of impoverished sharecroppers.³⁹ Audiences heard the sounds of B.J. Crosby's voice delivering "Amazing Grace," the story of Roussève's grandfather whose experiences of oppression destroyed him, and a choir's voice that helped to illuminate shared social understandings of sexism, racial hatred, HIV/AIDS.⁴⁰ Through narrative, song, and dance, *Urban Scenes/Creole Dreams* created a dialogue about social life in America.

Song was integral to how this piece investigated historical dynamics. Lynn Garafola described how the work showed Roussève's admiration for black women, because the entire production was constructed around their performances.⁴¹ The woman who played Roussève's grandmother, B. J. Crosby, largely told stories off to the side in her rocking chair about rape, killing, grief, embarrassment, and pain.⁴² Granny and her sisters' creative imaginings in a shack

in the bayou deepened the musical longings of everyday play with the beginning nursery rhyme “I wish I had a nickel/I wish I had a dime/I wish I had a man who’d kiss me all the time” and the clapping games “Three, six, nine/The goose drank wine.”⁴³ She remembered stories about being African American and orphaned in Louisiana but as she began to lose layers of clothing, her voice gained strength and the past appeared to drop away.⁴⁴ The first section concluded with her husband Johnny’s suicide being pictured as a theatrical folk opera: a chorus sang the sorrows of the migrant who had evolved into a laborer for white visitors at a train station and dancers quickly carried luggage that represented Johnny’s shame.⁴⁵ Roussève merged his own story within Granny’s memories by discussing his first day at a recently integrated high school in Houston; he seemed to be picking up where Granny left off, offering a continuation of her recollections.⁴⁶ Garafola positioned the significance of Roussève’s narratives within the broader musical context of the piece in her assertions that no moment was as moving as the singing of “Amazing Grace” and that every aspect of the piece seemed to delve into the arts of music as even the spoken scenes were articulated with a “chanted riff” through repetition.⁴⁷ Overall, Garafola described how grandmother’s narratives and the final moment of her singing united the different themes of the piece through comedy, emotional uplift, and suffering.⁴⁸

As artistic forms supporting the larger objective of *Urban Scenes/Creole Dreams*, music and movement began to illustrate Roussève’s multifaceted position as a choreographer. David Gere described how B.J. Crosby’s singing threatened to be the marker of a two-hour show with narrative, hip hop movement, and choir singing until you recognized that her singing was a metaphor for all the prior activities.⁴⁹ Gere analyzed the different stories: the daughter of sharecroppers in Louisiana whose past stories involved loving connections to her cousin Bonnie who was raped; the story of Arceneaux’s husband who talked about driving trains but worked as

a railway porter; and the grandmother whose dream continued to resurface through smoke and hanging nooses onstage and as her family members moved in a cloud and slowly disappeared from view.⁵⁰ The piece flashed nonlinearly through different periods in time from the grandmother's point of view to Roussève's as he shifted from understanding his own losses from AIDS and extending these emotions into a universal platform.⁵¹ The twisting postmodern movement succeeded when dancers appeared as back-up singers from the 60s, clawing the space, trembling with sorrow, or using their fingertips to trace their bodies like treacherous boll weevils.⁵² Gere described how Roussève cannot be understood as a "choreographer, in the strictest sense of the word" as the Temple choir's singing passionately offered an important tune through its sounds that reflected a train's whistling while the rigorous dancing and improvisational movement seemed disconnected from the broader narrative.⁵³ Gere's descriptions positioned the singing as part of the larger arc of the piece and raised questions about how Roussève's choreography functioned outside certain standards of crafting dance.

Roussève could be understood as operating within some particular criteria of creating movement. Susan Foster defines "choreographic conventions" as repetition and change in gesture, rhythmic structure, the deployment of particular body parts, the place of artists onstage, and the focal point of a performer's gaze.⁵⁴ These translations or ways of understanding the subject or meaning of the dance are a "tradition of choreographic conventions" that become the essence of the dance by relying on a history of particular codes, practices of representation, and ideas about structuring movement.⁵⁵ Foster illuminates how viewers can only understand a choreographer's place within a specific tradition by doing the work of reading how an artist creates dances. As Gere described how Roussève's choreography appeared to be out of place from his stories, he revealed the difficulties in reading dance that prioritizes a tradition of African

American narratives alongside postmodern movement. Gere called parts of Roussève's movement "full-out," an assertion that could be linked to early 20th century choreographer George Balanchine's virtuosic, highly skilled body,⁵⁶ yet, Balanchine chose subject matters that would enable him to present rigorously artistic visuals.⁵⁷ Roussève, on the other hand, used this kind of "full-out" movement to rigorously examine social issues on the concert dance stage.

While functioning within the choreographic convention of virtuosic movement, he also chose narrative and movement as forms that would illuminate the politics of black artistic traditions. The presence of black women's experiences in Roussève's work concerned the act of voicing histories of oppression as a form of healing. In *Talking Back*, bell hooks posits that oppressed persons work to reclaim themselves when exposing false realities and expressing ideas about the past as they have learned these truths "mouth-to-mouth."⁵⁸ Roussève reconstructed the stories he heard from his grandmother to unite the different parts of his piece. Moreover, Paul Gilroy reveals how music allows us to see how cultural expressions offer commentary on racial inequality and forms of domination ingrained in daily existence.⁵⁹ Rousseve's use of music became part of what Gilroy describes as reproducing a distinct counterculture to modernity, because he challenges the essentialist notions and universal constructions of tradition through his focus on the lives of gay black men in America.

Roussève's multimedia work involved a method of reinterpreting voices from the past to make sense of experiences in the present. Lewis Segal examined how the grandmother evolved to be the best aspect of Roussève's life because her story enabled him to articulate a "personal authority" about past experiences and to tell his family history in a way that made the piece become an American cultural landmark.⁶⁰ He constructed comedic and humorous offerings to connect the history of his grandparent with a contemporary discussion of the HIV/AIDS

pandemic.⁶¹ These stories were linked across generations, but Roussève unearthed an important discovery through his own particular experience: for redemption you must look to your ancestors to locate hope.⁶² Anna Kisselgoff also spoke to Roussève's multimedia work, describing how he provided a range of images and narratives about HIV/AIDS, racial oppression and freedom in sexual practice and blurred the lines between these politics.⁶³ As Roussève expressed his experiences through the frameworks of dance and theatre, he showed how a creative articulation of personal history forges familial memories into the broader structure of US history.

The use of personal experience to examine gender, race, class, and sexuality was inextricably linked to the politics of diaspora. In their essay, "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity," Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin analyze how Zionism or Jewish state hegemony is not the apex of Jewish identity but rather a subversion that substitutes a European cultural and political structure for the traditional Jewish culture based on distribution of political power with others.⁶⁴ They suggest that Jewish subjects be discussed in terms of generational linkages in order to privilege a dynamic, critical Jewish identity.⁶⁵ Roussève focused on generational linkages to challenge preconceived notions about the historical significance of African American narratives as well as the problem of homophobia in the present-day. He begins with an inquiry into his grandmother's memories of sharecropping to position his choreographic work within the context of black labor in the US South. Moreover, he retraces the rigidity of African American traditions by transforming discussions of his own grandmother's histories to insert a contemporary dialogue into his dance-theatre productions about the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS. Such work enabled him to foreground an authorial voice about political issues in African American life by reinterpreting memories passed down generations to examine the conflicts and opportunities of tradition in the black diaspora.

The Body: *The Whispers of Angels* (1995)

Roussève's *The Whispers of Angels* explored how African American traditions can be interpreted to connect with experiences of persons living on the margins of certain religious theologies. I describe how the stories articulated in the production can be associated with black radical practices in the twentieth century American South. This inquiry into African American people's resistance leads me to argue that these same traditions must be continuously recreated to incorporate the diverse complexity of experiences in today's world. I conclude by positing that Roussève illustrated how spiritual practices must be transformed in order to connect with the story of a gay black man dying of AIDS.

In *The Whispers of Angels*, Roussève examined the life of a gay black man with AIDS who was in search of his father. The story discussed how Roussève was born in Georgia but raised in New York, examined a man whose ancestors were slaves, and mother who had to abandon her newborn son to care for the young child of her dead white mistress.⁶⁶ When the mother passed, the family set up a new life in New York, but the father lived impoverished and sour from his work as Santa in a department store where he offered gifts to children that he could not even provide for his own.⁶⁷ The father returned to the South and got his leg jammed in a cotton gin, while his son attempted a celebrity life that ended in his passing of AIDS.⁶⁸ These stories came together with juxtaposition as an ensemble of divas was positioned against the experience of father as Santa and an image of a nude body illustrated how the pain of life and death existed in the throat.⁶⁹ Shifting from a story of his role in soap operas to a journey towards heaven, Roussève traced a remarkable and inspirational path.⁷⁰ In the middle of this arc, he mixed movement, theatre, music, and humor to articulate his journey to find his lost father and expressed the grief and joy of living, and dying as a gay black man with AIDS.⁷¹ The piece

linked different media, including gospel singer B.J. Crosby who sang “Georgia on My Mind” and “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” while the ensemble of Chicago singers also functioned as a chorus and a background frame.⁷² Roussève compiled his performance work into an uplifting type of live drama, skillfully transforming the last experiences of a person living with AIDS into comprehensible terms: “Hold my hand—I’m dying.”⁷³ Roussève’s journey to find his absent father ended in the words of a man approaching death and the arc that led to this final statement consisted of narratives that spoke of his families’ memories.

The stories in *The Whispers of Angels* were linked to histories of radical practices in the American South. Mary Talbot described how Roussève managed to make a precise, uplifting stance about the pain and the desires of human existence with extensive webs of storytelling, visuals, and full emotion that illuminated the work of a talented, compassionate art-maker.⁷⁴ Talbot examined how the piece may seem to foreground the experience of a gay black man dying of AIDS and his yearning to make amends with his estranged father, but AIDS was actually only part of the broader piece’s focus on death.⁷⁵ Love and faith as markers of African American family histories were more primary, as these themes were articulated through the “whispering voices” in the body of a dying man, his grandmother, the singing ensemble, a guardian angel depicted by B.J. Crosby whose melodies filled the theatre, and an ending with the cast as well as viewers singing “When the Saints Go Marching In.”⁷⁶

In these descriptions of characteristics of African American family traditions, Talbot identified the importance of historical practices in *The Whispers of Angels*. Such traditions of narrative, storytelling, and song were part of black traditions that fueled unprecedented social change in the US South. In *Hammer and Hoe*, Robin D. G. Kelley argued that black Communists provided a sense of legitimacy for the Communist Party (CP) in Alabama as practices such as

singing became part of the CP's resistance culture as a result of blacks drawing from their spiritual practices.⁷⁷ The growth of the CP enabled a hidden transcript of the black community to come forth and became a distinct practice for black working class resistance through supporting interracial solidarity without entirely losing hold of racial politics.⁷⁸ Through Roussève's use of his grandmother's stories and his own experiences, he connects *The Whispers of Angels* to this history of sharecropper's practices that enabled historical transformation in the South.

Roussève emerged as a primary figure in the piece, because audiences became part of his spiritual path. Deborah Jowitt described how the ensemble worked marvelously in a cotton picking visual, while shaping a human bridge for Charmaine Warren to take her mother into heaven, when illuminating the broader subject of words "hold me, touch me, love me, stroke me, because I am alone," and as their fluid movement, rolling onto one another, or jumping into each other's arms showed the essence of a soft embrace.⁷⁹ Jowitt exclaimed that the best part of the piece was David Roussève himself as he took audiences through his journey into a heaven that opened up the soul.⁸⁰ His narratives enhanced the theme about a dying man's spiritual journey to find his absent father, creating the soft, ironic heart of the piece in scenes where he depicted himself or a character in his life.⁸¹ Through truth, cunning, irony, and "cool," Roussève's speeches deepened each familiar subject by telling stories about how his dreams and his ancestors' hopes had been challenged by racial oppression and homophobia.⁸² Although *Whispers* showed a path marked by dramatic obstacles with his nude body and his voice expressing "Hold my hand, I'm dying" to a raspy tune of vowels, Roussève journeyed through this rude awakening with elegance and knowledge.⁸³ In *The Whispers of Angels*, Roussève brought audiences into the work of making the connection between past and present.

The naked body onstage illuminated how Roussève unsettled conventional practices. In

Cities of the Dead, Joseph Roach describes how the landscape of regions such as New Orleans, Louisiana bore the consequences of slavery, because the dead continued to be living in the material and spiritual work of the community.⁸⁴ Memory is an expression of the dead who can only articulate themselves through living bodies.⁸⁵ Yet the primary use of choreography in *The Whispers of Angels* produced a major divergence from the convention of public performances that project an outright nostalgia for legitimacy and origin. Susan Foster outlined how dance movement enables an opportunity for “kinesthetic sensations” through immediate and prolonged stretching, contracting, oscillating that may bring to surface different associations with memories, reflections, emotions and imaginaries.⁸⁶ Expression is an act that can be used for different purposes in creative work as choreographers keep their audiences in mind when constructing artistic pieces.⁸⁷ Roussève used the naked body to articulate the role of embodiment in recreating the self. Following the discomfort of a dying man’s shaky words, reconciliation became connection or a lasting embrace between father and son. Viewers could become attuned to the stories Roussève had told in this moment: to dreams, losses, and to hopes of connection before passing on to a place that was beyond the experience of a dying body. Dreams might not evolve in life but, in the world of creativity, the present could be remade through imagining an existence in which reconciliation and hope become real through embodiment.

The depth at which Roussève entered into his personal experience allowed the politics attached to sexual practices to emerge in his choreography and the problems of homophobia in particular. As the stage turned into a landscape in which cotton grew and his voice articulated the voices of the South he remembered, his grandmother’s life entered the center of his contemporary life and the past and present converged. The dancers moved together in ways that supported the piece as their bodies brought to life the landscape of the South and their hands

molded the path towards heaven. In *Butting Out*, Ananya Chatterjea addresses how choreography can make the connection to religion in a framework that articulates resistance and critiques a mere rigid expression of spirituality.⁸⁸ *The Whispers of Angels* makes this kind of commitment to revising power dynamics that undermine justice.⁸⁹ Roussève uses singing practice as an indication of how traditional practices continue to be deeply embedded with homophobia.⁹⁰ Roussève's choreographic framework articulates how such ideologies must be transformed in order to recognize the experiences of gay men in the African American community. The crackling sounds of the throat became the sign of pain, loss of life, passing on, and as the body struggled to clearly voice concerns, the nearly breathless gasps became a desperate call. The distorted whisper of a man dying of AIDS was all part of the struggle for reconciliation that made the piece whole. Roussève transitioned into the heavens to reinvent a landscape in which homophobia might be dismantled through a transformation of tradition.

Roussève's multimedia work illuminated the complex embodiment processes needed to transform the rigid behavioral practices that are continuously re-expressed through homophobia. Gayatri Gopinath reveals the relationship between heterosexual practices and citizenship within the nation because queer persons or, in the case of *The Whispers of Angels*, a gay African American man, develop a different relationship to the notions of "home" and "family" as a result of rigid articulations of nationalism.⁹¹ The grandmother formed a center of the story, but as told, embodied, and interpreted by Roussève who used dreams to recreate his connection to the spiritual practices of the American South and reexamine his relationship to the everyday conditions linked to being a gay black man in American society.

“Classic Blues”: Love Songs (1998)

In this section, I discuss how viewing Roussève’s work required that spectators make some of their own connections out of the work. I begin by examining the significance of the different musical choices in *Love Songs*. I provide extensive descriptions of critics’ analyses in this section to illuminate all the different points at which these viewers could have embodied the act of making their own connections. I describe Roussève’s use of juxtaposition through the filmmaking technique of montage editing because this analysis allows me to emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of his choreography and to discuss the specific role of the spectator in their examination of his work. Last, I argue that the use of music enabled Roussève to illuminate the importance of contradictions in exploring African American histories.

Love Songs focused on the broader story of two slaves’ quest for freedom. Roussève worked with the music of Puccini as well as the compositions of Richard Wagner whose anti-Semitic viewpoints led him to become a distinct figure of German nationalism.⁹² Critics considered the use of music to be overpowering and contrarily, to deepen the piece’s major focus on contradictions. Christopher Reardon explained that the musical picks were a surprising decision for this particular African American, gay choreographer because Roussève despised Wagner prior to working on the piece and found all he understood about him as a human being to be appalling.⁹³ While exploring the contradictions of despising Wagner for his racial prejudices and appreciating his compositions, Roussève became puzzled about how a person of such repulsiveness could make music of profound excellence. The major context of *Love Songs* evolved into a collage of his family histories, social analysis, and visual stage work to create a visceral postmodern narration using Wagner’s “Tristan and Isolde” that tells the deadly story of a pair of Celtic royals through opera.⁹⁴ Jennifer Dunning argued that Roussève deployed Wagner’s

and Puccini's compositions with a fluid musical combination that gave the piece additional splendor while also suggesting that the use of Wagner also enabled Roussève to let these grandeur sounds fuel the scene into legendary impressiveness.⁹⁵ Jeanne Claire van Ryzin described how as a romantic tale with characters and aspects of the present-day city life was reinterpreted, this storyline and musical composition offered a cultural juxtaposition with a wealth of original Southern black lore, a remarkable theatre of operas about love, and the experimental sharpness of postmodern dance that combined to articulate a lively tale of "bittersweet" intimacy.⁹⁶

Three descriptions from critics reveal how the new work also produced new challenges through music, narrative, and movement. Deborah Jowitt described how although you do not expect a linear narrative with Roussève's work, she wanted to see the "awkward" places resolved."⁹⁷ Jeanne Claire van Ryzin described how Roussève intended to produce "narrative juxtaposition" through the "cultural clash" of black storytelling and Wagner's music, but the piece did not quite come "together as a seamless work" because the "drama seemed off balance with the dance."⁹⁸ Sarah Kaufman also identified how the music was "meant to be in stark juxtaposition to the slaves' story" but as the curtain opens with a theatre packed with different people in big hairdos and jumpsuits, it added to the "building sense of confusion."⁹⁹ Jennifer Dunning identified an Aunt Jemima figure and Isolde in the mix.¹⁰⁰ Yet, Kaufman suggested that their identities were unknown to the viewer until Roussève's story made such familiar faces evident.¹⁰¹ Critics developed contradictory assessments of the complex nature of juxtapositions between music, narrative, and movement.

The contradictions were particularly evident in the piece's narratives. The intimate union between slaves John and Sarah went through a series of paradoxes from slavery to freedom,

devotion to disbelief, and sunlight to the eternal evening and Roussève incorporated different contemporary roles into the piece such as Southerner Grady McRady and a city drug addict who developed a spiritual portrayal from “The Wizard of Oz.”¹⁰² Jennifer Dunning called Roussève a choreographer and director who creatively produced a mystical showing that moved across different time periods with extraordinary precision and a bright visual essence.¹⁰³ Additionally, she described how the piece could be weakened through his approaches to his different subjects because he portrayed different characters of different sexualities in intimate relations in the present-day, producing near alternatives to the tale of slaves Sarah and John whose connection resisted division or racial oppression.¹⁰⁴ She argued that Roussève appeared to be emotionally disconnected from the themes of a talkative southerner to a slow-talking urban druggie, and moreover, she wondered if he was behaving seriously as an abused Sarah was lit while crawling across the stage to her long-lost John who stabbed himself in a different spotlight.¹⁰⁵ In contrast, Deborah Jowitt described Roussève as a beautifully skillful art-maker, juxtaposing terms into a sharp, elegant tale with a southern accent.¹⁰⁶

In addition to the music and narrative, the movement was also crafted with great complexity. The most intricate movement section of “Love Songs” was the part the dancers referred to in practice as “the percolator” when they moved in a small space, changing their weight and from different partners quickly—the difficult part was not only preventing collisions but also coming to the precise position at the correct moment with the exact emotional essence.¹⁰⁷ With former pieces, Roussève’s choreography relied on the distance at which you could toss your partner and in this piece, he focused on how much you could outstretch your chest, allow your weight to descend, and how you could release into your partner.¹⁰⁸ The difficulty in passing body weight of different dancers around and the challenge of ensemble

movement that required reliance on other dancer's weight was recognized as Jeanne Claire van Ryzin expressed how the piece was challenging and concretely uplifting through its bridging of creative work and different genres of expression.¹⁰⁹ Yet van Ryzin also articulated how the piece was not quite perfectly jointed when occasionally the dancing appeared just partially off from the developing story and during other sections the theatrical storyline appeared disjointed from the movement.¹¹⁰ Jennifer Dunning described how the visuals of honest, embracing, solo movement that were silently embodied by Roussève as well as the easy outstretching of John's limbs into the light of the fatal scene allowed the viewer to become immediately grounded.¹¹¹ Overall, van Ryzin described how Roussève moved a new path forward in this piece through its being enhanced with emotion, alive with ideas, sharp with pushing for intimacy in today's world—all of which could have been even stronger with bringing the piece together a bit more.¹¹²

Many of critics' descriptions seemed out of place when considering how Roussève makes choreographic decisions with concrete specificity. While producing *Love Songs*, he transformed how he creates with music through decreasing the intuitive structure of his movement.¹¹³ Four months prior to the premier of *Love Songs*, Roussève choreographed *Simple Gifts* for the Houston Ballet by repeatedly examining each note in Aaron Copland's "Appalachian Spring" so he would be aware of his reasoning for going against any note.¹¹⁴ As Roussève developed work with such critical detail, the places considered "awkward," "off balance," and a "building sense of confusion" might constitute the places in which the viewer could create their own relationships between contradictory images and movement.

Roussève's work required that observers make some of their own connections from the material. His use of juxtaposition enabled an important relationship between choreography and the moving image—that is, filmmaking—to be articulated. To cut across space, he compared the

stories of drug users in urban environments to talkative storytellers in the southern countryside. Extending beyond differences of time, he looked at these contemporary stories in connection to the experiences of slaves. To examine diverse cultural dynamics, he positioned the music of Wagner alongside African American folklore. Furthermore, he bridged distinct, artistic genres by deploying dance, narrative and visual aesthetics such as the ballroom with an array of dead celebrities and ancestors. The complexities of these comparisons could be explained through a film technique known as montage editing or “crosscutting.” Documentary filmmaker Dziga Vertov describes this technique as the “rhythmic unity of heterogeneous themes” so that deeply embedded frameworks of editing shift in “favor of pure movement, the celebration of movement on the screen.”¹¹⁵ Wolfgang Iser describes how film has the capacity to “teach us that perspective—a social act—orders multiplicity” because camera imagines a “spatiality that may yet become in social life.”¹¹⁶ *Love Songs* illuminated how juxtaposition, or the unification of contradictory elements, might come together as the viewer participated in the act of structuring themes through their own experience.

Critics failed to embody the social act of structuring interdisciplinarity, diversity, and complexity of music, narrative, and music so that they could recognize, for instance, the relationship between the context of blues music and the use of Wagner in *Love Songs*. Leroi Jones defines “classic blues” as a form that was more impacted by diverse musical influences.¹¹⁷ He describes how the specificity of African American experiences shifted in this particular construction of blues music in order to develop parallels with broader American society¹¹⁸ As Roussève produced these kinds of complex relationships to forms such as “classical” music, viewers needed to be engaged in the practice of structuring the interdisciplinarity of artistic methods so that they might comprehend such nuances.

Labor: *Saudade* (2009) and *Two Seconds After Laughter* (2012)

This section examines the labor of Sri Susilowati in Roussève's choreographic work.

First, I describe some of the broader themes that Roussève explores in *Saudade* and I discuss the particular significance of Susilowati in this piece. Second, I explore how he captured Susilowati's journey back to her home of Indonesia in the film *Two Seconds After Laughter*. This particular work offered a different direction from his past productions that provoked questions about exploitation, exile, and political and economic disenfranchisement. I conclude by posing that Roussève's attention to Susilowati's labor shows how dance and film can be combined to examine the lived experiences of diasporic communities.

In *Saudade*, Roussève examined how the contradictions in the present world resist actual comprehension. A duet between two women dancers seemed to be a dramatization of rape with screams of "no" until an uncomfortable crying out of "yes" emerged at the very bitter end.¹¹⁹ Intermittently, dancers attempted to intervene in Roussève's path as he made calculated steps on a sharp diagonal across the stage throughout the performance. Through gesture and voice, he embodied the experiences of a man dying of pneumonia in a hospital bed, and a woman separated from her family after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. The backdrop screen—displaying shadows, video, boxed textures, and even appearing to be a red, pleated dress—was filled with the handwriting of a slave named Sally whose sister's tears dropped into the palm of her hand as she was being raped by her slaveowner. *Saudade* showed how different characters struggled to overcome their pain.

Moreover, Sri Susilowati's role in the choreography revealed the cross-cultural complexities of lived experience. Roussève described how *Saudade* inquired into "contemporary life as a series of colliding extremes that ultimately can't be understood so much as just lived."¹²⁰

Additionally, Roussève revealed how he aimed to weave an “emotional autobiography onto these characters” so that the piece would become a “personal exploration” as well as a “meditation on societal commonality.”¹²¹ Through the dancing of Indonesian choreographer Sri Susilowati, he illustrated these aims to examine his own experiences while also reflecting on the importance of making diverse connections. In *Saudade*, a small screen glided onstage to show a short film of Susilowati chewing chilies until her face was covered in dripping tears. Critic Robert Johnson described his perspective of this scene: Roussève created a piece that let the imagination roam through dreams by filling the theatre with contradiction, inspiration, and a continuous deconstruction of our notions of truth; because the articulation of stories was not enough for Roussève, he employed the eating of chili peppers as an invitation for the viewers to challenge the validity of his narratives.¹²² Johnson persuaded spectators to understand how the piece suggested that viewers grapple over the meanings of life by journeying into the body and letting go of words.¹²³ Roussève’s work illuminated how choreographies of lived experience could connect the stories of different diasporic communities by focusing on embodiment.

He expanded on the work of *Saudade* by working with Susilowati to produce *Two Seconds After Laughter*, a film that emerged as a result of their shared cultural experiences. Susilowati returned to Indonesia after twenty years of living abroad and in his 16-minute film, Roussève captured how she embodied this dynamic return. Susilowati enjoyed the moments of laughter and humor with her family, but following such joyful exchanges, she struggled to engage with a subject of vital importance in her culture: children. Roussève defined the film as “emotionally autobiographical” because he, as Susilowati, had no children and the inability to discuss the memories that evolved from having children were integral to his experience of African American culture in Houston, TX.¹²⁴ As kinship developed between Roussève and

Susilowati around these politics of cultural experience, *Two Seconds After Laughter* could be categorized within a specific filmmaking context known as observational documentary. In this film genre, the camera becomes an extension of the body because filmmakers position the body's experience at the center of interactions between filmmaker and lives of people being filmed.¹²⁵ Observational filmmakers are critically attached to the particular social lives they explore and develop intentional, personal relationships with these individuals.¹²⁶ As an observational filmmaker, Roussève's relationship with Susilowati constituted the driving force of the work.

Roussève does not merely fit within the broad scope of observational filmmaking work; he contributes to the expansion of the genre. In the film *Salesman*,¹²⁷ Albert and David Maysles observe the labor of salesmen by entering the houses of potential buyers, driving in the car of salesman Paul Badger as he travels to and from homes, sitting in hotel rooms where salesmen converse, listening in assembly rooms where salesmen gather for presentations, and standing on doorsteps where salesmen wait for customers. In *Two Seconds After Laughter*, Roussève pays this kind of detailed attention to labor by focusing on Susilowati's movements. She carefully places the ball of her foot on the dirt road as she dances in unison with her classmates through a deserted town. She moves alongside her former dance classmates surrounded by trees, lies in the grass to gaze up at the sky, flaps her arms repeatedly in front of a graffiti painted wall, and stares out into a misty, gray fog. Her position in the formation does not remain stagnant, for her torso begins to oscillate out of balance with the other dancers, her head shifts out of place, and her hands move rapidly as her classmates maintain a slower, calculated pace. Susilowati's labor is different than those she danced with two decades prior, because her movements have transformed into quick, sudden, rapid, and displaced gestures.

Roussève's film illuminated the significance of dance movement in provoking questions about labor and diasporic histories. In *Sweating Saris*, Priya Srinivasan describes the labor of dancers through gestures made with their hands, distinct feet articulations, twisting and swift movements, bodily fluids that spill onto the ground, their traveling in space, and the molded shape of their body that makes their labor seen.¹²⁸ Furthermore, Srinivasan argues that certain forms of attire that get displayed on bodies evolve into a "metonym for the dancing body as labor."¹²⁹ In *Two Seconds After Laughter*, Susilowati wears a strapless black and gold dress with a jeweled belt tied at the waist, and a long yellow fabric and three-layered necklace hangs down the centerline of her body. Her arms, wrists and ears are adorned and a crown of jewels is attached to her head. In this accouterment, she stands on top of a building in Yogyakarta, Java, Indonesia until sunset. Through his film, Roussève illuminated the complexities of Susilowati's experience as a diasporic person by filming her labor.

Chapter Two: The Choreographic Work of Ananya Chatterjea

In this chapter, I analyze the choreographies of Ananya Chatterjea. First, I discuss how she expanded on her training in Indian dance forms by reconfiguring these aesthetics in order to provoke questions about multiculturalism. This section examines how “classical” Indian dance functions as a practice of reconstruction. Second, I analyze three of Chatterjea’s artistic productions: *Pipaashaa*, *Extreme Thirst* (2007), *Daak*, *Call to Action* (2008), and *Ashesh Barsha*, *Unending Monsoon* (2009). I discuss these three works in separate sections because I intend to show how Chatterjea’s continuous transformation of Indian dance explores the stories of diverse communities. In each of these sections, I begin by discussing how the analysis will contribute to my broader inquiry into choreographies of lived experience. After investigating these three artistic productions, I analyze *Moreechika*, *Season of Mirage* to explore how Chatterjea enables audiences to participate in the creative process of choreographic “writing.” As part of my analysis in the following sections, I examine how dance critics describe her work.

“Classical” Indian Dance

In this section, I use two descriptions of the term “classical” to examine how Ananya Chatterjea’s ideas about multiculturalism become a central frame of her choreographic work that reconstructs Indian dance forms. The first is Ananya Chatterjea’s recognition of the ruptures that take place when practitioners of Indian dance forms neglect to follow an uninterrupted “tradition” and reiterate a rigid code of “classicism.”¹³⁰ The second is Janet O’Shea’s refusal to recommend a new series of parameters for Indian dance; rather, she acknowledges how such forms develop important areas of exchange, argument, and debate.¹³¹ I expand these analyses by examining the role of a cross-cultural framework in reconstructing “classical” Indian movement. This section analyzes how Chatterjea’s experience training in Indian dance fueled her mission to create choreographies in which women’s stories from across the globe meet on the concert stage.

Connected to every aspect of Chatterjea's training in Indian dance forms were the complexities of women's experiences. In Kolkata, West Bengal, India, her dance training began at the age of five because of her mother's own insistence on the daily rigorous practice. Her mother had wanted to dance, but her family's financial constraints at the dawn of partition and independence in India had not enabled her to engage such a creative journey.¹³² In order to maintain Chatterjea's enrollment in dance training, Chatterjea's mother would take two additional buses for transportation instead of paying the few extra rupees to simply take a taxi.¹³³ As her mother denied herself many of the most modest of comforts so that her daughter could dance, Chatterjea's own artistic journey began with her mother's own early desires for creativity.

In addition to Chatterjea's mother's artistic interests, women's social roles in Hindu temples framed some of the broader histories of her training. Dance aesthetics were historically practiced in temples and backed by royal patronage as a result of Hindu principles about the role dance played in spirituality and creativity.¹³⁴ Through their service to particular deities, these women were known as *devadasis* and their labor enabled them a certain kind of economic flexibility that exceeded the constraints of a social structure in which women were merely acknowledged for their familial partnerships.¹³⁵ As the structures of British colonialism dismantled this system of temples receiving financial support, many devadasis had to lead lives of prostitution and struggled to negotiate a rigid social system in which women were left with no monetary source to help facilitate their economic independence.¹³⁶ Chatterjea inherited the larger, complex layers of these women's histories as well as her mother's specific dreams of creativity at the dawn of partition in the mid-twentieth century.

Through the legacy of her teacher Sanjukta Panigrahi, Chatterjea's training was also deeply rooted in the reconstruction of Indian dance forms in the mid-1900s. Chatterjea

specialized in Odissi dance with her guru Sanjukta Panigrahi who played an important role in the restructuring of Odissi. Specifically, while an independence movement led efforts to form a postcolonial nation, Indian cultural activists sought to reconfigure the dance of the devadasis that had been disrupted during the British colonial era. During the Jayantika project of 1957, the most important guru of Odissi, Kelucharan Mahapatra, along with gurus Mayadhar Raut, Dayanidhi Das and Debaprasad Das, scholars of Odissi dance Dhiren Patnaik and Kalicharan Patnaik, and government scholarship students Sanjukta Panigrahi and Mayadhar Raut contributed to the “Sanskritization” of Odissi or the reconstruction of this Indian dance form in association with the Sanskrit text *Natyashastra*.¹³⁷

Chatterjea mastered her skills in Odissi movement with Sanjukta Panigrahi whose prestigious leadership could be traced to a landmark moment that had forged Odissi into a series of movements to be learned by generations of future dance practitioners. Moreover, Chatterjea specialized in an aesthetic that had been rebuilt through the guidelines of a written classical text. From a mother’s search for creativity during independence, the devadasis’ historical social roles, and a teacher’s participation in the reconfiguration of Odissi, Chatterjea had to make decisions about how to use her own lived experience to comprehend these histories she had inherited through her dancing.

The environment in which she trained helped to facilitate artistic mastery. She learned dance in the *guru/shishya* style of teaching in which the guru was a preceptor of knowledge and the shishya was the disciple that became a guru through commitment to rehearsal and individual reflection.¹³⁸ While deeply immersed in learning diverse forms such as Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Manipuri, and Odissi, Chatterjea remembers being constantly urged by her instructors to push herself further and even receiving a stick thrown her way if she did not execute each

movement perfectly.¹³⁹ The guru/shishya system was a challenging structure of instruction that encouraged Chatterjea to articulate movements effectively and more broadly to engage in the cultural and social relationships linked to the dancing space.

Chatterjea's creative ideas began to revolve around issues of dance and society. During her training, she learned that India was a vast map consisting of different states with different languages but that all were connected through the principle of "unity in diversity."¹⁴⁰ The relationship between unity and nationalism was linked to her training because the reconfiguration of Indian dance forms occurred alongside the creation of a postcolonial nation-state. In particular, the revival of the Indian dance form Bharatanatyam took place from 1923 to 1948.¹⁴¹ At Jayantika, advocates of Odissi were left to grapple over how to recognize the form, as Bharatanatyam practitioners had created a firm approach by claiming the forms "classical" position according to the teachings of the *Natyashastra*.¹⁴² The concept that Chatterjea learned about "unity in diversity" was connected to the categorization of Indian dance forms at Jayantika because both reveal how dancing is associated with the politics of the nation. As Chatterjea became exposed to the relationship between dance and social politics, she found ways to be active about the histories of women connected to her dance training.

Everyday social realities were integral to the principles attached to Indian movement aesthetics. Kapila Vatsyayan argues that understandings of Indian philosophies must be deepened to examine the complex system of terminology that dance practitioners have the capacity to constantly transcend. Describing Bharata's writing in the *Natyashastra*, Vatsyayan defines the terms *natya* as the art of drama and *sastra* as scriptures.¹⁴³ Working through the question of whether dance emerged from drama or vice versa, she postulates that the *Natyashastra* functions as a document that is not solely about drama.¹⁴⁴ She persuades dance

practitioners to comprehend the philosophy and practice of Indian dancing as needing distinct focus from the larger assertions about dramaturgy being expressed by Bharata.¹⁴⁵ The intricate composition of Indian dance technique is a series of parts that culminate in a system to evoke a specific sentiment or *rasa*, and to emphasize the relationships between these distinctions.¹⁴⁶ As misconceptions exist about Indian dance, its history and origins, Vatsyayan demands that ideas about Indian dance be reformulated to understand how the movements are forms that bring together different techniques and styles. Chatterjea had not simply learned a dance form that had been reconstructed according to the principles outlined in the *Natyashastra* but had been immersed in movement with the capacity to communicate emotion and to produce connections.

As Chatterjea extended her training to include the form Chhau, the relationship between social politics and movement became increasingly significant to her dancing. While specializing in Odissi with Panigrahi, Chatterjea was also exposed to other forms such as yoga and Chhau martial arts.¹⁴⁷ Chandralekha describes how militant operations were important historical references for dance forms such as Chhau because unarmed dancers went before the military to dispirit opposing forces with their quickness and fluidity.¹⁴⁸ Paika or “infantry” soldiers confronted external aggressors through dances that enhanced physical excitement and bravery ensured warriors were instantaneously prepared for battle.¹⁴⁹ Examining forms such as Chhau help to pinpoint the intersection between Indian movement and everyday social conditions.

When Chatterjea began choreographing her own work, she demonstrated the role of dance in exploring social issues. A particular example of her choreography helps to examine the effects of her reconfiguration of Indian dance forms. Janet O’Shea describes how Chatterjea’s piece *Unable to Remember Roop Kanwar* (1997) discusses the politics linked to Roop Kanwar’s death in 1987. O’Shea examines how Chatterjea’s choreography revealed the imperialist notions

that underlie international feminist agendas when Indian women are described as being in need of rescue or protection.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, her work showed how Indian dance forms already exist in a transnational realm and offer ways of contending with global politics in the immediate social world.¹⁵¹ O’Shea proves that the piece illuminated the ways Chatterjea grappled over how to represent the multiple layers of Roop Kanwar’s story through classical movement. As Chatterjea deploys the forms she trained in to respond to political concerns and local conditions, her choreography illustrates the political dynamics of contemporary Indian dance. Chatterjea’s choreography experimented with Indian movement to stage progressive politics because contemporary Indian dance could work through revisions of classical aesthetics to raise awareness about social challenges in the present moment.

Chatterjea built on her earlier choreographic works by starting her own dance company that brought the politics of multiculturalism and women’s experiences to the concert dance stage. While conducting graduate research, Chatterjea had hoped “to meet people from all over the world” while “talking about our reality” but it “never ever happened” because she learned that discussions of multiculturalism did not have concern for the “other meeting the other.”¹⁵² In Minneapolis, MN in 2004, she brought to life her vision of dance as a practice through which women of diverse racial, ethnic, national, and cultural backgrounds could meet. By founding her company Ananya Dance Theatre (ADT) in 2004, she began choreographing artistic productions that focused on women’s protests against gender inequality and that initiated a dialogue about women’s access to water. Beginning in 2006, her pieces *Pipaashaa*, *Extreme Thirst* (2007), *Daak*, *Call to Action* (2008), and *Ashesh Barsha*, *Unending Monsoon* (2009) investigated the environmental challenges women experience across the globe.

Community Activism: *Pipaashaa, Extreme Thirst* (2007)

In this section, I analyze how Chatterjea's collaboration with environmental justice leaders contributed to her choreographic work in *Pipaashaa, Extreme Thirst*. First, I discuss the contexts of diaspora that are linked to her alliance with community organizers. Second, I examine how critics described the movement in *Pipaashaa* in order to illuminate whether these critics "read" the dance as provoking questions about environmental issues. I expand my analysis of "classical" Indian dance by examining how Chatterjea worked in solidarity with community activists to produce movement.

Ananya Chatterjea choreographed *Pipaashaa, Extreme Thirst* as she was grappling over her experiences traveling between the US and India. She became dismayed with how the market can have destructive influences on the livelihoods of women and children around the world because Indian women who once gathered firewood for subsistence were sifting through garbage areas or were employed in hazardous industrial facilities.¹⁵³ Chatterjea learned about farmers who had committed suicide because companies such as Coca-Cola had taken control over their water.¹⁵⁴ In the context of her growing environmental awareness in the diaspora, she became knowledgeable of the harmful amounts of arsenic that were discovered from soil tests in 2004 of the most impoverished district of southern Minneapolis known as Phillips community.¹⁵⁵ As Chatterjea began to understand the relationship between her home in South Asia and her home in the diaspora, she would use the concert dance stage as a space to examine women's environmental experiences.

Chatterjea created movement for *Pipaashaa*, the first piece of her environmental justice trilogy, by working with community activists Cecilia Martinez and Shalini Gupta. Susan Foster asks four questions to understand the distinct visions of choreographers: what are the artistic

efforts that create the dance, how are the practice sessions structured, what are the connections between the artists and the spectators, and what are the duties and desires of the artists and audiences.¹⁵⁶ Integral to the making of the dance, rehearsals, viewership, and expectations of audiences, involved the support of Martinez and Gupta from the Women's Environmental Institute in the Twin Cities—Minneapolis and Saint Paul, that is. These activists helped dancers to understand the politics of environmental challenges in distant regions such as Chechnya and locally in Phillips community.¹⁵⁷ For example, dancers were particularly impacted by the stories that revealed how toxins could change persons' abilities to physically manage their own bodies.¹⁵⁸ Some of the movements Chatterjea created from the new knowledge she had gained in these dialogues included a series of repetitive gestures so that dancers could become women struggling for air and engaging in strenuous work.¹⁵⁹

The collaboration also contributed to the community activists' aims to support the livelihoods of persons in Phillips neighborhood. As Chatterjea allowed many of their community members to view *Pipaashaa* without having to pay, this opportunity supported the activists' mission to mobilize persons in Phillips around issues of environmental injustice.¹⁶⁰ Martinez posited that *Pipaashaa* provided an important means of communication because dancers spoke to emotional experiences without incomprehensible jargon and so that communities would hopefully become inspired to change these pollution problems.¹⁶¹ Shalini Gupta described how ADT exhibited a type of control over their bodies that enabled the dance to have an activist power, a sense of hope, and to illuminate the possibilities of an ensemble of women working towards change.¹⁶² E.P. Thompson describes how events can only be understood through the mental and emotional reactions that develop from experience.¹⁶³ These activists' work with Chatterjea allowed community members to engage in the emotionality associated with

environmental pollution. Through *Pipaashaa*, Chatterjea connects with the politics linked to her own experience and creates movement in collaboration with environmental activists and community members.

As dancers reacted to the external substances and materials on their bodies while performing onstage, dance critic Sara Nicole Miller revealed how she understood the subject matter of the dance in three ways: pollution, resistance, and home. Miller expressed how the piece succeeded at illuminating broader viewpoints of environmental pollution as dancers contracted muscles, jerked, vigorously waved their limbs, crawled, wailed, and let out deep exhales while dropping onto their heads fell pieces of colored-dirt in mixed tones of a blood-marked melon and sickly-colored seaweed.¹⁶⁴ The story was unpleasantly precise, unfinished, and without defect as dark flakes dispersed beneath dancers' stamping feet and they wrapped their bodies in plastic remnants.¹⁶⁵ Miller's comments about pollution are supported by Marianne Combs who also remembered hazardous liquid seeping throughout the stage, overtaking the dancers and penetrating their attire as dark powder descended from overhead and plastic string strangled their bodies.¹⁶⁶ Such movements allowed Chatterjea's work to be linked to social challenges and to gestures in everyday life.¹⁶⁷ Miller's and Combs's descriptions illuminated how audience members could engage in the process of the dancers' execution by functioning as witnesses who confirmed the position of the choreographer's dance alongside the expression of gestures in broader society.¹⁶⁸ As *Pipaashaa* developed its meanings with particular images about how bodies reacted to hazardous substances with convulsions, changes in breath, and bodies being constricted by plastic, critics revealed how viewers could participate in the dance: through recognition of the relationship between the choreography and everyday life.

Second, the movement in *Pipaashaa* could also be comprehended as creating a site of critical dissension. Miller encouraged audiences to explore the piece as a narrative of caution, a space of resistance, and a painful interaction that rocked the senses and was embedded with chaos.¹⁶⁹ Seventeen dancers clothed in fluid, brightly colored wraps and sleeveless shirts tagged with a single bloodstained liquid drop twisted back and forth across the stage, appearing to be unbalanced beings crying and turning amidst the rapid environmental explosion of commercial life.¹⁷⁰ Eventually acknowledging the mysterious toxins on their bodies, dancers attempted to anxiously tear away, grab the substance off; through the laughter and insanity, they dropped onto the floor as if fish out of water while maintaining their concretely skilled artistry and the specific details of each stance.¹⁷¹ With the combination of bloodstains stamped on their costumes, being torn off-center, and their bodies shifting in the changes that evolved from an industrial world, dancers illustrated the effects of environmental pollution. Significantly, dancers continued to execute technique while removing the toxicity off their bodies and falling emotionally unstable.

Miller's emphasis on how dancers sustained their technique might be further explained as the role played by contemporary Indian dance in understanding the politics of today's world. Contemporary Indian dance pioneer Chandralekha argues that "traditional" dancers are engrained in a way of reiteration and reproduction of measurable principles, countering the values of *rasa* that focus on coming into an emancipatory human existence through the unity of self, nature, and society in a time of social disjuncture.¹⁷² She describes how contemporary Indian movement can be articulated through its own historical conditions and interdisciplinary frameworks that extend the reach of cultural practices.¹⁷³ Chatterjea's choreography accomplishes this kind of work through revisions of classical aesthetics to raise awareness about

social challenges in the present moment. As dancers' movement articulates resistance, *Pipaashaa* expresses the relationship between the environment, everyday life, and the body.

Third, *Pipaashaa* reveals the complexities of home. Miller asked audiences to acknowledge the piece's capacity to invoke through the practice of an unsettled, moving body that illuminates the significance of home in spite of its decaying existence.¹⁷⁴ Chatterjea showed the condition of a mother performing the misalignment of a body permeating with toxins through her lifeless sockets that moved about the stage in a state of disillusion.¹⁷⁵ As if walking undead, Chatterjea moved her body to the sounds of drills, cranes, and grinding machinery, becoming increasingly oblivious to her child who gestured for console beneath her.¹⁷⁶ The simple musical composition offered a discomfiting medley of industrial sounds such as the horn of a large vehicle backing up and banging metal to dull toned drones.¹⁷⁷ Miller's descriptions of ADT's technique provide an understanding of how dancers work through embodiment to express a mother's and child's experiences of environmental injustice. By identifying the movement of eyes as a mother's lack of attention towards her child, spectators could comprehend the kinds of histories being embodied by dancers.

The politics of diaspora resonate in *Pipaashaa*. Vijay Agnew posits that a feminist archive helps to illuminate the larger implications of the term "diaspora" by explaining the daily experiences of women.¹⁷⁸ As Chatterjea explores the human impact of environmental pollution through a mother and child, she also uses a feminist archive to prioritize the role of choreography in examining the politics of women's stories in the diaspora. Chatterjea uses dance as a process of engaging in activist work through her own personal experiences as a choreographer in the diaspora. Her dances offer a different kind of power for activist work, showing how the body can be implicated in as well as transformed by environmental issues.

Artistic Alliances: *Daak, Call to Action* (2008)

This section examines how Chatterjea's partnerships led to the creation of *Daak, Call to Action* (2008). First, I examine how her experiences as a diasporic person inspired her to produce the piece. Second, I discuss the significance of artistic alliances in her creative process through investigating her collaboration with theatre director Dora Arreola. Last, I examine how critics perceived the context of women's alliances in the piece. This section expands on my analysis of "classical" Indian dance by positing that Chatterjea continuously reformulates these movement forms as a result of the alliances she builds with other artists and in the community.

Ananya Chatterjea's journeys between India and the US led her to inquire into a different issue for *Daak*: land loss in native communities. Chatterjea recognized a sense of person's discontentment in West Bengal, India, for as she asked individuals about monsoon season, they could not understand how to negotiate the ways monsoon patterns had shifted.¹⁷⁹ She also learned that the government had ceased land from farmers for industrial purposes and persons were being uprooted from their homes.¹⁸⁰ In a region where communities had inhabited the land for generations, the concept of private control seemed inconceivable for a woman who expressed how she was aware of who owned the land nearest the palm tree at which she grazed her livestock, but felt the tree was her own.¹⁸¹ Chatterjea had thought idealistically about Bengal as a place of "green rice fields in the villages" but these return travels opened her eyes to the struggles that surrounded the enormous industries being built in the area.¹⁸² Her voyages between the US and India helped her to ask questions about the land challenges persons were experiencing, and, this time, her choreography would be enhanced through her artistic alliances.

Chatterjea's co-collaborator for *Daak* was theatre director and choreographer Dora Arreola.¹⁸³ Observing the human impact of land rights violations in her home in Tijuana,

Mexico, Arreola witnessed how families were displaced so that industrial space could be reserved to assemble televisions for purchase in the US.¹⁸⁴ Arreola explained how ADT was one of a few dance companies focused on social justice that aimed to increase awareness of how US-based consumers were complicit with global land struggles.¹⁸⁵ Arreola's comments illustrate how dancing in *Daak* was not designed to represent women's stories from across the globe but rather about connecting stories in the space, such as Arreola's, to that of others' lived experiences. The difference between offering a representation of women's experiences and making the connection to diverse lived experiences was integral to Chatterjea's process. ADT artists conducted research about their own experiences to develop the dance.

Critics' descriptions demonstrated how Chatterjea's choreography revealed the importance of alliances in a world where American consumption impacted the land struggles of communities. Camille LeFevre analyzed how, without question, the work had transformed the dancers because the choreography was intense and poignant, tireless, packed with elegance, and structured with rage.¹⁸⁶ Their bodies became objects in a larger system, but they managed to develop their own voices while compressing and tossing their limbs as if valves of machinery.¹⁸⁷ As they glided onstage in lines similar to the process of meeting gears, dancers reflected a small part of the "postcolonial machine" and contrarily, the rhythm of the ensemble articulated how "solidarity" could still be made amongst them.¹⁸⁸ Marianne Combs supported these descriptions of solidarity by discussing how dancers appeared as warriors while using hand brooms, grabbing hold of each other's arms to form a secure space, and being repeatedly led by a dancer who moved with a drive towards action.¹⁸⁹ These critics revealed how body parts seemed to be thrown across and onto the stage to embody the constant work of machines and to uncover the process of industry objects being manufactured for commercial exchange. Moreover, they

described how sliding back and forth onstage allowed their bodies to form part of a machine's rhythmic formation. They grabbed onto one another in "solidarity" to show how they were implicated in the "postcolonial machine" and as each dancer led the ensemble, they showed their potential to enact change. In *Daak*, dancers were part of the problem of consumption and through their alliance-making onstage, they also illuminated their immense possibilities.

By demonstrating the potential for individuals to be connected through technique, Chatterjea exposed the work of contemporary Indian dance. Pallabi Chakravorty examines how electronic media in today's economy has enabled new ways of re-imagining the nation through practices that both resist as well as perpetuate the past narrative of classicism.¹⁹⁰ As social and economic forces play a role in understanding contemporary Indian dance, Chatterjea's own choreographic work provided an important example of how to experiment with Indian dance forms by staging a progressive politics to examine global land issues.

Discussions of ADT's ensemble work raised concerns about the kind of vocabulary that should be employed to describe how the piece promoted solidarity amongst women. Camille LeFevre described how Chatterjea revealed a call to action by creating a "women's ritual" that seemed to function outside critique because viewers observed as admiring but uninvited spectators.¹⁹¹ As the dancers rhythmically pounded their feet, "the Earth" appeared to be resounding with dissatisfaction and this ensemble movement offered different emotional descriptions of difficulty and determination and removed each dancer's "individualism."¹⁹² The fourteen dancers strenuously practiced and enthusiastically enacted this "ritual" as they embedded the challenges and difficulties of women of color into their dance through the choreographer's "singular" dance aesthetic that was an efficacious and emotional mixture of Indian movement.¹⁹³ The performance was an expression of a full year of practice, exchange,

inquiry, dialogue, and social activism that united these dancers in a “ritual” of creative expression because dancers handled parcels of weeds as if these objects were forms of equipment or, more abstractly, as excess baggage.¹⁹⁴ LeFevre’s use of the phrase “women’s ritual” raises some important questions about the terminology critics deployed to describe the labor of dancers from diverse cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds.

In *Daak*, Chatterjea sought to prioritize women’s alliances. She choreographs using the form Chhau martial arts because such movement aesthetics function outside the parameters of dance forms such as Bharatanatyam and Odissi that were reconfigured during the revival period.¹⁹⁵ Moreover, Chhau can be used as a secular dance practice of Indian performance aesthetics that unsettles the rigidity of religious, gender, and sexual politics.¹⁹⁶ As Chatterjea seeks to challenge certain perceptions through Indian dance, her deployment of ensemble work in *Daak* might be comprehended as an action of solidarity and alliance-making rather than a simplistic “ritual” that relies on a “singular” dance aesthetic. Comprehending the dance through the perspective of women’s alliances as opposed to a women’s “ritual” might enable viewers to participate in the dance as invited observers.

Additionally, LeFevre’s use of the term “ritual” failed to consider how Chatterjea’s ensemble movement had the potential to illuminate the context of her alliances with indigenous communities. Marianne Combs, on the other hand, described how dancers dropped forcefully onto the stage to connect to the women and children who had prostrated for protest purposes in the middle of roads, offering a continuous reflection of the land under audiences feet in Minnesota that belonged to the Dakota people.¹⁹⁷ As Combs identified the layers of indigenous people’s realities connected to Chatterjea’s choreography, her assertion could be linked to the historical reconfiguration of Odissi as well as the social significance of contemporary Indian

dance. Aastha Gandhi shows how revivalists of Odissi relied on rigid ideas of women's bodies and neglected to recognize any role played by "indigenous," lower caste persons.¹⁹⁸ As the Odissi revivalists supported the configuration of a "new" feminine woman who would rearticulate a sense of professionalism, artistic excellence, and spirituality, they produced a foil to the former temple dancers who were in service to deities.¹⁹⁹ In order to work against the restrained order that became codified by gurus of Odissi, Gandhi suggests that Odissi practitioners develop a method in which dancers build their own sense of creativity outside the context of simply mirroring formulated instructions.²⁰⁰ In *Daak*, Chatterjea responded to such calls for a reconstruction of Odissi by producing ensemble movement that demonstrated the importance of indigenous people's claims to land.

As Chatterjea's choreography connects with native people's land experiences, she illustrates the significance of making alliances across borders. She aimed to discuss how environmental injustices existed in communities such as West Bengal, India and Tijuana, Mexico as well as in Leech Lake and the Lower Sioux Reservation of Minnesota.²⁰¹ M. Jacqui Alexander defines globalization as the reproduction of a series of colonial relations that severely impact indigenous people, people of color, the working class, and immigrants.²⁰² She recommends challenging these transnational forces with radical, intersubjective frameworks.²⁰³ In *Daak*, dancers' footwork created a sound that seemed to express the land's discontentment, to connect with the stories of indigenous women across globe, and to articulate how present challenges can be expressed through embodiment. In spite of her assertions of a "women's ritual," Camille LeFevre described how viewers leave knowing that ADT seeks to show how dance might transform the world.²⁰⁴ Chatterjea's artistic alliances enabled her to produce movement that illuminates her engagement with indigenous people's claims to land.

“Women of Color”: Ashesh Barsha, *Unending Monsoon* (2009)

In this section, I examine the politics associated with the lives of “women of color” through *Ashesh Barsha, Unending Monsoon*. First, I discuss the role of Chatterjea’s progressive politics in making the piece. Second, I examine how critics reacted to the interdisciplinary framework of Chatterjea’s choreography. Last, I reveal how critics identified an important moment in *Ashesh Barsha* that demonstrated how Chatterjea choreographs from lived experience. This section expands my analysis of her configuration of the “classical” by exploring how Chatterjea changes her deployment of Indian dance forms through a continuous transformation of her own political thinking.

In her book *Butting Out*, Chatterjea analyzes the choreography of Chandralekha who works in Madras and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar whose company Urban Bush Women is based in Brooklyn in order to challenge the conventions of whiteness and postmodernism in cultural production and to reveal the practices of marginalization in contemporary dance.²⁰⁵ She examines how these choreographers illuminate the “politics of defiant hope” by making the body a site of resistance.²⁰⁶ Chatterjea insists on the politics of defiant hope by structuring ADT around the lives of “women of color,” communities which must be defined through historical processes, rather than the simplistic terms of merely giving priority to the experiences of non-white women. Chatterjea describes her company as calling attention to racial, cultural, and ethnic differences and as resisting the necessity to structure her creative process around a white mediator, or, what she describes as a practice of “passing through whiteness.”²⁰⁷ She argues that alliances amongst women of color were historically fragmented through colonialism as whites negotiated particular relationships.²⁰⁸ Chatterjea describes how people of color could hardly support one another while struggling in conditions of small resources, and moreover, when you

live in a diaspora such as the US, people of color inhabit spaces in which they are inclined to be against one another.²⁰⁹ She witnesses repeatedly how women are not aware of each other's histories such as how India maintains one of the world's biggest social movements for women.²¹⁰ Chatterjea aims to get beyond such fractures by building relationships, but this requires that artists continuously engage questions about each other's histories, politics, and cultures.²¹¹

Through Chatterjea's descriptions of the histories of women of color, the shared experiences of colonialism in communities of color, and the importance of building relationships amongst the historically disenfranchised, she reveals her aims for a politics of defiant hope that creates solidarity across difference. M. Jacqui Alexander argues that women of color have their own connection to certain hierarchies and that power exists in the very interstices of daily existence.²¹² Asking about the kind of crossings women of color must trace in the present-day, she questions whether black women are knowledgeable of their diverse migrations and labor histories.²¹³ Alexander's analysis provides a particular example of the type of embodied labor Chatterjea intends to create through her choreography. Chatterjea seeks to practice a politics of defiant hope in which women are encouraged to investigate the complexities of their own histories so that they can find ways of intersecting their cultural, racial, and ethnic differences.

For *Ashesh Barsha, Unending Monsoon*, Chatterjea radically transformed how she choreographed around these politics of defiant hope. In this particular piece, she assessed the challenges of global climate change. In contrast to the other performances that concluded with a hopeful note, she offered no solutions to these concerns. As the world's minerals were being increasingly depleted, she felt that the contemporary moment was beyond the point of hope.²¹⁴ What happens when a choreographer such as Chatterjea radically transforms her progressive politics? How do audiences "read" the dance without the choreographer making specific

decisions to produce a hopeful charge? Does a change in Chatterjea's politics of defiant hope lead to a shift in her ideas about reconstructing Indian dance forms?

While Chatterjea changed decisions about how to craft the emotional arc of her piece, she continued to insist on the ways abstraction allowed her choreography to remain inextricably linked to the politics of defiant hope and to ways of reconfiguring Indian dance forms. Following the staging of *Ashesh Barsha*, Chatterjea described how dance works through abstraction so that metaphor helps to provoke certain questions about an individual's position in the environment and how to respond to particular social problems.²¹⁵ Janet O'Shea argues that "classicism" involves a kind of continuity that a dancer can strategize with and within but that does not require a perpetual reiteration of form.²¹⁶ Through classicism, Indian dancers could work creatively inside an aesthetic without interrupting what was considered to be instrumental Indian heritage.²¹⁷

Analyzing classicism as a strategy through which Chatterjea could establish an experimental practice reveals how *Ashesh Barsha* became an extension of *Daak* in calling on audiences to take action. In the end, the piece may have resisted a specific image of hope, but Chatterjea's exploration of classical movement invoked an uplifting experience by revealing the relationship between multiple life forces. In her assessment of the social origins of dance, Chandralekha demonstrates how Indian structures of creativity emphasize the role of the human body in every aspect of cultural formation as principles such as the *mandala* help to conceptualize the relationship between the self, community, and cosmos.²¹⁸ By working within classical Indian movement, *Ashesh Barsha* provided a framework to understand everyday life through embodied practice. In particular, she examined how the urgent crisis of daily realities

require a focus on taking action, a mission that continues to function within the realm of contemporary reconstructions of classical movement.

Critics' descriptions of *Ashesh Barsha* revealed how viewers comprehended the relationship between the movement and environmental issues. Marianne Combs analyzed how the piece started with dancers dressed in vividly blue attire and they moved elegantly together to deploy the various stylized gestures and footwork of Chatterjea's aesthetic.²¹⁹ As the piece developed, the dance and music quickened and the movement became rigid and percussive as if rain were dropping heavily onto the street.²²⁰ The overpowering sounds shifted the grace amongst the dancers, making an upsetting image of women contracting with popped eyes and limbs askew while the piece shifted from stomping rain to unbearable heat, and from visuals of a glacier emerging and receding.²²¹ To emphasize environmental concerns, dancers frequently stared at their feet that had been outlined with a dark streak as a metaphor of examining the carbon footprint on their bodies.²²²

Although critics made these associations between the movement and pollution, they also grappled over the ways Chatterjea's mixed media performance forged together a series of complex political issues. Jon Behm described how *Ashesh Barsha* intended to respond to concerns about reparations, the problematic handling of hurricanes and tsunamis, and how alliances have been neglected and indigenous ways of knowing destroyed across the globe.²²³ He considered such political aims to be significant, but the broader descriptions to be a mixed bag of humanistic concerns, environmental problems, discrimination based on race and sexuality, the degradation of indigenous knowledge, and consumerist tendencies.²²⁴ These politics might be connected, but he believed that attempting to explore each politic in a 100-minute performance could also be excessively ambitious.²²⁵ According to Behm, examining how exactly these

politics of race and sexuality link to the environmental agenda was an important idea, but he thought the metaphors presented did not consistently link to this aim of broadly examining environmental problems and the visuals presented were lacking in nuance.²²⁶ He insisted *Ashesh Barsha* developed a vague theoretical discussion and did not go beyond raising audience's consciousness by causing spectators to actually engage with the issue.²²⁷ Behm's concerns bring forth questions about the capacity for *Ashesh Barsha* to transform spectators' ideas of environmental injustices.

The work of locating the relationship between these issues of race, gender, indigeneity, and capitalism could be simply identified by viewers. Lightsey Darst also questioned whether an artist can outwit a spectator into examining challenging concepts, but she posited that viewers' perspectives of whether the piece was successful relied on what techniques they perceive to be politically significant.²²⁸ She believed that viewers could engage in the dance, because Chatterjea does remarkable things with Odissi so that the elevated energy of the aesthetic and precise angles appeared to be stylized movements of workers weaving or conducting agricultural work with a sense of pain and loss of home.²²⁹ Darst intended to conclude with a "hopeful note," and accomplished this task by discussing how Chatterjea's daughter Srija Chatterjea Sen seemed to exceed her limit as a dancer and distributed a lasting release throughout the theater.²³⁰ For Lightsey Darst, the point at which the complex issues being discussed in *Ashesh Barsha* met were through the ways Srija expressed the particularity of Chatterjea's construction of Odissi.

Audience Engagement: *Moreechika, Season of Mirage* (2012)

I conclude this chapter with a discussion of how Chatterjea enables audiences to participate in the “writing” of the dance. Susan Foster proves that “writing dancing” allows the viewers to engage in the actual choreography, to aid in creating their own reactions to the dance, and to produce both playful and critical engagement.²³¹ I examine how spectators engage in this writing practice by exploring *Moreechika: Season of Mirage*. I use my field notes of ADT’s world premiere of *Moreechika* to describe dancers’ movement in the piece. This section expands my analysis of the “classical” by discussing how Chatterjea intends to reconfigure Indian dance forms by connecting audience participation to broader social movements.

Through each section of *Moreechika: Season of Mirage*, Ananya Chatterjea explored the human impact of oil production. In “Almost Gone,” Alexandra Eady moved slowly inside of a massive piece of black plastic to connect with the physical impairment endured by those whom survived a gas pipeline explosion.²³² In “Vision,” Sherie Apungu used two stretched fingers to outline her shocked eyes alongside Ananya Chatterjea in order to embody how women might bear witness to daily environmental problems in their communities.²³³ Without showing any conscious awareness of other dancers in the ensemble, in “Chakravuyha,” the group created an intricate spiral as individualistic, competitive laborers in a capitalist-structured society.²³⁴

In “Bird,” Chitra Vairavan’s off-centered balances, disoriented backbends, and sickly hand gestures became the nearly fatal existence of a creature covered in oil in the wake of a disastrous petroleum spill.²³⁵ In “Plastic Desire,” Orlando Hunter designed a plastic sari around his waist to embody the feminine and masculine roles played by authority figures in the global petroleum business.²³⁶ He shaped a garment traditionally worn by women around his hips to

embody transformation of as well as complicity with the environmentally hazardous practices of the oil industry.²³⁷

In “Nightmare,” Rose Huey suddenly shifts away from the tightly unified ensemble, her shaky limbs foreshadowing the grave moment when dancers would almost poke their own eyeballs out of their sockets. She called on viewers to think carefully about how competitive behaviors might cause persons to experience mental and physical self-destruction.²³⁸ At the conclusion of “Progress,” Sarah Beck-Esmay emerged from the pack of dancers rolling in a fetal position offstage to become a vivid image of how hyper-glamour could effectively bewitch a person into a state of emotional dysfunction.²³⁹

In “Beauty,” Hui Niu Wilcox pranced elegantly about the stage holding a long, draping thread of plastic while completely oblivious to the dark lipstick scattered across her cheeks.²⁴⁰ Her obscure stupor became an abstraction of how individuals apply petroleum-concentrated cosmetics to beautify their bodies.²⁴¹ In “Game,” Brittany Radke connected with a young Kichwa woman in Ecuador struggling with cancer as she passed over the hunched spines of dancers who seemed to refuse to acknowledge her terminal condition.²⁴² In “Tremors of Spring,” Lela Pierce paced back and forth worrisomely until she froze in a precarious stance with her leg and arm stretching across the stage. Her position went beyond a mere witnessing of environmental devastation that Apungu and Chatterjea had illuminated in “Vision” and gestured towards collective opposition against the oncoming urgent crises in communities.²⁴³

In “Anchuri!,” Renee Copeland marched “courageously onstage, firmly planting her feet, crossing her hands behind her back, and maintaining a fixed gaze outward towards an impinging enemy.”²⁴⁴ She connected with indigenous communities struggling to “protect their land from

encroaching” oil companies.²⁴⁵ In “Blinding Storm,” the puppets walked over dancers until the protruding stomachs of these ancestors became invisible.²⁴⁶

The piece concluded with dancers burying themselves deeper into a storm of flying rice and then one-by-one, audience members got up out of their seats, crowded the stage alongside dancers and participated in forming new constellations—patterns and mythological figures that would disconnect contemporary existence from the failures of the past—out of the fallen rice.²⁴⁷ While observing the mixture of individuals onstage, Lightsey Darst described the rice as “the evidence” of everything that had occurred in the piece.²⁴⁸ The dancing in *Moreechika* had not happened in a different space or to a group of other individuals in a far distant place to which she was broadly connected through the forces of the global economy; rather what occurred in the theatre had transpired without “others” or foreigners.²⁴⁹ Audience participation in the final writing of the dance became the culmination of *Moreechika* in which Chatterjea deployed her reconfiguration of Indian dance forms as a tool to engage with the presence of political resistance in the contemporary moment.

Chapter Three: Theorizing Cross-Cultural Engagement: An Autoethnography

This chapter examines how I came to understand the relationship between cross-cultural engagement and embodied practice. In particular, I discuss how I worked with David Roussève to develop a performance about the politics associated with my grandmother's narrative of land loss, labor, and lynching. I also worked with Mary Nooter Roberts to create the narrative for this piece and dialogues in the post-performance talkback became central to my thinking.

Additionally, I examine how my research with Ananya Chatterjea allowed me to reimagine the issues linked to my grandmother's story. Through my exchanges with artists in her company, I conducted a deeper inquiry into my own history as well as the experiences of others. Before proceeding with my analysis, I will briefly explain why the autoethnographic method and debates in the field of diasporic studies are integral to my discussion in this chapter.

Autoethnography is the interpretation and analysis of both personal experience and other persons' histories. As Heewon Chang examines how a researcher only succeeds in producing an autoethnography by exceeding the constraints of self-analysis, this chapter focuses on what underlies the autoethnographic method: cross-cultural analysis. Chang argues that autoethnography offers numerous benefits across various disciplines because the method enables self and other to gain a deep comprehension and develop effective relationships with diverse groups.²⁵⁰ I expand on Chang's descriptions by discussing how autoethnography can be understood as an embodied method that enacts cross-cultural engagement. In particular, the analysis of the self and the other can be an embodied interaction in which certain behaviors and modes of being must be radically transformed to promote a shared sense of empowerment. Autoethnography, as an embodied practice, has the potential to illuminate how a person has worked through movement to critically engage with personal histories and the histories of others.

In this chapter, I use the terms “self” and “other” to discuss the embodied engagements between different diasporic groups of diverse cultural, national, racial, and ethnic histories. As my analysis of exchanges across these communities leads me to examine how the term “diaspora” is a central term for my discussion of cross-cultural engagement, I intend for my inquiry to contribute to debates in the field of diasporic studies. Theorists argue that the term “diaspora” is deployed without specificity to analyze any and all movements and migrations across space and time. Robin Cohen demonstrates how our understandings of diasporas, and Jewish communities in particular, must be revised, interrogated, and transcended to take into consideration the multiple experiences of the communities that have been labeled as diasporas.²⁵¹ Stephane Dufoix addresses how diaspora enables us to position dispersed persons within a rigid framework without consideration of their social, cultural, economic and political diversity.²⁵² Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur suggest that diaspora studies must shift away from discussing how subjectivities are constructed to examining how diasporic identities are experienced.²⁵³

I argue that the term “diaspora” can be deployed with theoretical rigor when examining an embodied reinterpretation of specific personal histories. Robin Cohen reveals that the histories of diasporas be comprehended through a revisionist strategy. This chapter discusses the significance of reinterpreting personal histories in the diaspora. Stephane Dufoix reveals how the term “diaspora” is deployed without theoretical rigor and Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur persuade thinkers in the field of diasporic studies to focus on lived experience. I examine how the term can be used to investigate the histories of particular persons. I use the autoethnographic method to inquire into the role of embodiment in diasporic experiences. I emphasize the continuous reexamination of such histories in order to prioritize cross-cultural engagement.

Family Histories

In this section, I analyze the significance of life history interviews and collaborative engagement in this embodied work that intended to reexamine the political dynamics of familial histories. I investigate the politics of land loss, lynching, and sharecropping that emerged from the life history interviews that I conducted with my grandmother. I examine how the acts of resistance that she engaged as a sharecropper led me to produce a performance about her story by collaborating with David Roussève and Mary Nooter Roberts. I discuss how my aims to develop a methodology that produced an equal relationship between writing and performance enabled a dialogue about shared empowerment to emerge.

Life History Interviews

In winter 2011, I recorded a series of conversations about past experience and personal memories with my grandmother who was a sharecropper in the Mississippi Delta. At the end of the cotton-growing season, sharecroppers accumulated very little income or in more severe cases, accrued significant debt after paying a landowner a portion of the crop's value and the money owed for advancing the seed. My grandmother discussed many stories of her life as a parent in a sharecropping family, including memories of her husband's—my grandfather, that is—work as a field supervisor. In this section, I focus on four particular descriptions.

The first narrative revealed how laborers transformed the work of log cutting into a community activity. My grandmother discussed how she believed her grandfather might have earned the money to purchase one hundred twenty acres of land by clearing away woodlands in Mississippi when he was not working in the cotton field:

They bought that land cheap. He would clean up land in the wintertime when they wasn't working in the field. And the way they would do it, get a log roller down at the party at night. And the folks would be coming to that party. The men would be out there and just cutting down the trees and burn them. See they just wasted that wood, there was plenty wood then. It wasn't scarce then, saying don't do this, don't do

that. And they would have them fires out there. They called them log parties. And they clean up land for them. Women folks would cook up all different kinds of food, chickens, turkeys, and ducks. They would party all night fixing, cutting up, sawing up wood. He didn't have to pay nothing for that. They would split the wood then. They just split them trees and once they get them down, when they saw them up to pieces like they want. They just bust them open. As you cut, you stick a wedge open as far as you want your post to be. That's the way they make pastures and things. For cows and hogs and all that different stuff.²⁵⁴

In *American Congo*, Nan Woodruff describes how lumbermen emerged as the planter class in the Delta because farmers recognized the immense value of soil underneath the woods and hired sharecroppers to clear these lands.²⁵⁵ My grandmother's memory of her grandfather's log cutting work deepens Woodruff's analysis, because she brings attention to how sharecroppers transformed their labor processes into a creative, community activity.

Land and labor were inextricably linked in the Mississippi Delta in the 1900s. My grandmother remembered how her grandfather owned 120 acres, livestock, and cultivating supplies in Mississippi in the mid- 1920s. She told me how he was dispossessed of this land and nearly lynched by some members of the Ku Klux Klan:

He would buy that land, woodland and all and just cut it up. So he had 120 acres. You see my grandfather was buying too much land and getting too well off for white people and they got upset about it. And they said if they didn't do something he would soon "own the whole damn state." So there was so much confusion. And so then they told him to get out and he didn't move. And so they caught him one night when he was coming home. And they was meaning to kill him. But he outran them and went in and jumped in a pool of water. You know, a puddle of water. And he grabbed a straw and lay down in that water to keep them from killing him. Now that was the second time, not the first time. The first time they got him, they meant to beat him up because of the same thing—they wanted him to move. But he didn't want to leave his stuff. They were going to make him leave, take the family cause they were going to take the place and everything. They started fighting. But he was a very strong man and he fought them

and got away from them the first time. There was more of them than there was the first time when they got at him. And he was able to run from them and get away from them. But that time, they were coming on him so fast that he jumped in that pond and grabbed a straw or something, A stem—you know that grass—where he could breath. So he hid in that water where they couldn't see him because they would have killed him. So then he had to go because they were after killing him. He had to start making preparations to move. They gave him, I think it was a month to get away and get everything he could take away. Because see he had cows, hogs, mules, wagons and everything. Guineas, turkeys. They give him, I think it was a month to get all of his stuff. But they only let him bring two of his mules from Mississippi.²⁵⁶

Woodruff makes some important connections between the issues of black landownership and land dispossession that my grandmother discussed because she reveals how a majority of African Americans were landowners and the role Klansmen played in redirecting the course of black property ownership in the twentieth century. Woodruff discusses how a majority of African Americans acquired property at the turn of the century in the US South, positing that by 1900, more than three-fourths of blacks in the Delta owned land.²⁵⁷ She continues her analysis to argue that Klansmen aimed to “drive black sharecroppers from fields and black landowners from their property” using activities to force African Americans off the land.²⁵⁸

Looking deeper into historical analyses of the twentieth century American South shows the social and political impact of lynching in the US. Neil McMillen examines how Mississippi was the state with the most egregious statistics on lynching as a result of two distinct periods of mob activity: the agricultural depression around 1889-1908 and the post-World War I era in 1918-1922. McMillen argues that Mississippi became the most racially discriminatory state because white leadership permitted lynching behaviors and refused to consider these acts lawless.²⁵⁹ Moreover, he refutes claims about the social class of white mobsters by stating that economically underprivileged whites may have performed the violent tasks of lynching but did

so in consultation and under close observation of wealthy white southerners.²⁶⁰ Lynching must not be remembered as a few individuals conducting some vigilante tactics, but more broadly understood as an activity that helped to ensure a general state of racial exclusion in the Delta.

Some additional context demonstrates how tensions around race were at the center of lynching practices. Paula Giddings posits that African Americans were not lynched in higher numbers until 1886 when more blacks moved from rural areas into southern cities, former Confederates reestablished power in state government and blacks worked to accumulate wealth, end racial injustice, and build institutions.²⁶¹ Giddings examines lynching through her biography of civil rights leader Ida B. Wells-Barnett who worked to prove that the majority of lynched persons were African American men and less than one-third of these were accused of rape.²⁶² Through her description of this early pioneer against lynching, Giddings reveals that accusations of sexual assault overshadowed the issue at the crux of lynching—that is, the problem of racial hatred. The lynching attempts my grandmother described were part of a historical terrorism that existed at the turn of twentieth century, were included in a southern strategy that prevented blacks from owning and cultivating land to develop wealth, and were firmly attached to a broader problem of racial subjugation in the US.

My grandmother's story of land, labor and violence was part of a history of colonization in the US South that aimed to deprive blacks of the economic wealth that could be acquired from land ownership post-World War I. My grandmother discussed how her grandfather's experiences of near lynching led to his land loss, his banishment from residing in Mississippi, and an ultimate shift from his family's independent landowner status to working as sharecroppers:

[Grand]mama's daughter and her husband moved with [grand]mama after [grand]papa died. Yea that's the way it was. And moved to Sicily island. [Grand]mama was with her daughter and they farmed. See they just farmed. They was them halfer hands. Cause when you did that, you just got half of what you

made. You made 10 bales of cotton, you only get paid for five cause the white man got five and you got five... Things went downhill when papa died. We just stayed moving every year or two. And did like the sharecroppers they called it.²⁶³

She remembered how her grandmother and her aunt and uncle struggled while working as sharecroppers in Louisiana after their family endured land loss, were uprooted from their home in Mississippi, and experienced the passing of her grandfather.

White planters in the Deep South discussed publicly their progressive agricultural practices to integrate the South into the larger US economy while denying black laborers their civil rights and deciding on their own terms whether or not to protect them from the Ku Klux Klan to which they themselves might well belong. Woodruff argues that planters' use of government and law structures helped to create an "American Congo," referencing the horrific period of King Leopold's possession of the Congo Free State, when capitalist-instigated persecution included intimidation, most famously in the severing of people's hands if they failed to gather "enough" wild rubber. Woodruff examines issues of land, labor, and violence by comparing the politics of racial oppression in the Mississippi Delta to imperialism in Central Africa. African American landowners were deprived of their properties post-World War I and sharecropping was utilized as a strategy to socially, politically, and economically control blacks in the Jim Crow South.

Collaboration

My grandmother's narrative reveals the complex relationship between land ownership, lynching, and sharecropping in the twentieth century and moreover, her descriptions also show how sharecroppers mediated the structures of racial and economic disenfranchisement in the Delta. My grandmother described how she used daily activities such as gardening to supplement household income and ensured her children went to school:

I made things as easy I could. I raised chickens, geese, and maybe I had some ducks...All that helped a lot. I was one of those real hustlers. I wanted mine to go to school. I tried to work so I could keep them in school. Be able to buy them shoes and all. Some parents get them a little something and their children couldn't get back to school. I would do everything I could do. If anything I could sell. I would do all that to help out. Raising them little truck patches and things. I raised a garden.²⁶⁴

This fourth story became the excerpt of my grandmother's narrative that helped me to understand how to engage with her experience.

Her discussions of how she worked to negotiate economic challenges were memories that related more closely to my own experiences as a community organizer. During the entire duration of my adolescent and post-collegiate years, I participated in community activist initiatives. For example, from 2008–2010, I worked as a community organizer with HIRE Minnesota, a coalition of community-based organizations. I managed administrative coordination for the creative and performed aspects of the campaign—that is, the continuous mobilization of bodies at town hall meetings, at the MN state capitol, construction work sites, and the MN Department of Transportation in order to sway legislators to take action to increase employment rates for low-income people and people of color.

My grandmother's memories of supporting her children's education connected with my own experiences as a community organizer because of her work to transform economic

challenges. Donald Grubbs argues that Southern planters held fast to the structures of labor from slavery because old-fashioned social patterns were an unavoidable aspect of the entire structure of cultural perceptions and attitudes that considered sharecroppers an inferior group and kept their children out of school.²⁶⁵ Although Granny's work outside of her field duties to feed and clothe her children was the activity Grubbs posits most sharecroppers were unable to accomplish as a result of the extensive labor required of them.

The act of being a "real hustler" as a sharecropper was part of a longer history of radical practices engaged not only during the sharecropping period of the twentieth century, but also during the antebellum era of the American South. For instance, in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Eugene Genovese illustrates how blacks developed their own sense of humanity during slavery as they were permitted garden plots and chose to labor on these for many hours at night or on Sundays to support their families with additional food and attire.²⁶⁶ My grandmother's description of being a "real hustler" could also be understood through the work of James C. Scott in *Weapons of the Weak* in which he focuses on "everyday forms of resistance" to understand the continuous tension between powerless groups and authority figures who intended to exploit their labor.²⁶⁷ My grandmother's narrative required an understanding of the everyday actions of black laborers as a form of everyday resistance.

I began to comprehend the underlying meanings of my grandmother's actions when I examined how the histories of sharecroppers' actions in the South were not only linked to practicing everyday forms of resistance, for as these memories were expressed during interviews, they could also be understood as an act of creativity. In *All God's Dangers*, Theodore Rosengarten expresses how much is lost and gained in changing stories delivered orally into a textual document because in its literary form, an enduring practice of invention and reinvention

ends and is taken outside the existence of the narrator.²⁶⁸ The storytelling practices of farmer-storytellers are not a static process without change, but rather are a performance of creation and recreation. As a former Southern sharecropper provides an oral delivery of their experience, such storytelling can be considered a creative act.

These descriptions of how oral histories were performed allowed me to understand the role of my grandmother's story outside a mere presence in the archive. In *Doing Cultural Anthropology*, Michael Angrosino describes how life history researchers currently focused on how narratives were constructed and utilized archival documentation to support this data because life history interviews illustrated the ambiguities and challenges of memory.²⁶⁹ Researchers employ this technique to transform the historical record with different stories about race, ethnicity, gender, ability, class, and sexuality.²⁷⁰ To illustrate a different set of possibilities for oral history work, I sought to reexamine the dynamics of my personal lineage rather than merely analyze her story as historical evidence.

I began by exploring the context of arts-based research. In the spring of 2012, I worked with David Roussève to create a performance about my grandmother's story. First, he recommended that I understand how performance provided a reference to access the dynamics of my grandmother's experience and to examine how my research methodology necessitated creative work. Second, Roussève asked me to consider what kind of artistic skills I had in place to produce a performance because the depth of my own mastery would affect how we defined the rigor of the piece and would also help us develop a coherent conversation about my grandmother's experiences.²⁷¹ Diana Taylor's analysis in *The Archive and Repertoire* supports Rousseve's first assertions because she demands that writing is not the process by which all persons arrived at "culture" or became "modern" as embodied behaviors play an important role

in maintaining memory and bringing together identities in different worlds.²⁷² In *Method Meets Art*, Patricia Leavy examines how creative practice and qualitative research can both be understood as “crafts” because the latter accomplished more than writing through composition, orchestration, and weaving.²⁷³ The politics associated with my performance relied on embodied knowledge as a methodological tool to inquire into my grandmother’s experience.

Arts-based research involved a practice of working in collaboration with others. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz insists that ethnography is a practice of “thick description” performed by ethnographers who must not calculate the logic of explications but rather understand how the scholarly imagination allows them to be in close proximity with the lives of strangers.²⁷⁴ In her essay “Writing Against Culture,” Lila Abu-Lughod expands Geertz’s postulate about how anthropological interpretations are assessments of particular experiences by reflecting on how feminists and anthropologists with transnational and racially diverse parentage have been identified as biased observers.²⁷⁵ She describes the dispute about whether these researchers have enough distance from subjects of study as part of broader questions on the presumed objectivity of the ethnographer as an outsider, observer, and interpreter of the community being analyzed.²⁷⁶ Anthropologists can write against culture by making connections between the anthropologist and the community being studied.²⁷⁷ Patricia Leavy also examines the significance of forging relationships by describing how arts-based research practices depend on a “collaborative method.”²⁷⁸ In order to use the data I had collected from my life history interviews to produce linkages across different experiences, I needed to work with others to reconstruct the politics associated with her memories.

Through collaborative engagement, I reconstructed my grandmother’s story through movement and narrative. David Roussève described my delivery of the narrative as challenging

to follow and recommended that I transform my own habits through variation of the tone and rhythm of my voice and continuous improvisation with movement.²⁷⁹ My other collaborator Mary Nooter Roberts felt the narrative was too dense and suggested that I keep working with the different voices of my grandmother and her grandfather.²⁸⁰ Moreover, she encouraged me to forge methodological reasoning into each step of the performance process.²⁸¹ Collaborative work enabled me to understand that reinterpretation of my grandmother's experiences involved a shift in the rigidity of my own actions, behaviors, and ideas about creating narrative.

This creative work around my grandmother's story led to some important questions about the politics of land in the diaspora. My collaborative performance process culminated in a 25-minute solo performance titled *An Exploration of Land, Narrative and Performance (ELNP)* in my Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance. In the post-performance feedback session, Hip Hop art-maker and educator D. Sabela Grimes examined how the choreography "held a charge."²⁸² Responding to Grimes description, Allen F. Roberts linked the term "charge" to the *nkisi* phenomenon in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in Central Africa in which dancing can fuel a site of power that contributes "to a sense of collective empowerment."²⁸³ These assessments helped to illuminate some important possibilities of my creative work while also raising some important questions about cultural specificity. What are the differences between claims made to land in indigenous communities and in the diaspora? Why do the lived experiences of diasporic persons necessitate an embodied practice?

Understanding the complex relationship between indigeneity and diaspora concerned an inquiry into a particular embodied process: memory. In *A Dance of Assassins*, Allen F. Roberts proves that European visitors during the colonial era of the 1880s mapped the DRC through a "colonial landscape of memory," or through their own memories and objectives that greatly

differed from the practices of local people.²⁸⁴ In order to understand memory outside of the colonial context, Roberts suggests we outline the codes and conventions of dance aesthetics and performance mechanisms that underlie the worldview of Bantu-speaking peoples.²⁸⁵ For instance, the energy of an nkisi is a convention which involves an engagement with heritage by communicating with ancestors living in other worlds.²⁸⁶

The DRC is marked by the colonial landscape described by authors such as Nan Woodruff in *American Congo*, and Allen Roberts reveals how such histories are constructed by the embodied practices of Central African peoples' logic. My grandmother labored in the landscape of the Mississippi Delta that Woodruff describes as inextricably attached to an "alluvial empire" because southern planters articulated a rhetoric of progressive farming techniques while exercising oppressive labor practices on its colored labor force.²⁸⁷ Roberts and Woodruff help to illuminate the ways that my grandmother's experiences are connected to colonial histories in Central Africa, because of how she worked as a sharecropper during a period of racial subjugation. As Roberts examines how landscape is a process like memory because it is produced, negotiated and linked with ideas about lineage and territory,²⁸⁸ my grandmother's story was also linked to these histories through embodiment practice—the ways she remembered her own grandfather's experiences of land loss, that is.

Diasporic Histories

In this section, I explore the role of embodied practices in understanding the politics associated with living in the diaspora. I reexamine my grandmother's story through the context of being an artist in Ananya Dance Theatre. I build on my understandings of collaboration by analyzing how Ananya Chatterjea co-conceives elements of her artistic productions while working through theatrical direction from women in the black diaspora. Last, I analyze how the lived experiences of diverse diasporas might intersect through collective empowerment: an embodied practice of critically inquiring into personal histories.

Cultural Activism

In the summer of 2012, I transitioned from having collaborated with David Roussève and Mary Nooter Roberts on a performance about my grandmother's story to embodying a different creative process: exchanges between different diasporas in Ananya Dance Theatre. Ananya Chatterjea continuously reinvented the training and artistic aesthetic to push her artists to continuously develop their craft, and to create a space committed to working on artistic excellence.²⁸⁹ She led warm-ups in which dancers moved in *tribhangi*, a footwork position originating from Odissi. We stood with our weight onto a bent right leg, left foot planted diagonally forward, torso in a half moon shape, hip thrust out, and gaze towards *hamsasye*—the image of a flower being molded with our index finger and thumb. We moved out of the *tribhangi* stance by lifting our elbows into the firm rectangular shape of *chaukha*—another stance derived from Odissi, that is. Chatterjea had enhanced the warm-up to include a deeper focus on training in yoga,²⁹⁰ as we began to ignite yogic breath in lounge stretches that lengthened our spines, increased the mobility of our hips in triangular postures, strengthened our inner thigh muscles in warrior stances, and rinsed our organs in twisting movement. My dancing in ADT reflected Priya Srinivasan's concept of an “unruly spectator,” or an active observer who interacts with dancers

and produces a feminist viewpoint on how dancers' negotiate power in their lives.²⁹¹ As I participated in these summer practice sessions, my understandings of my grandmother's memories shifted towards cross-cultural engagement. I became the puppeteer, a role that allowed me to reengage my analysis of my grandmother's experiences by focusing on how different diasporic histories might meet through embodiment.

Performing as the puppeteer involved transforming comprehensions of past experiences by manipulating the "hungry ghost" figures. In the first ADT rehearsal I attended, dancers showed the kinds of relationships I must build as the puppeteer. They began by cutting up large portions of black plastic for "Almost Gone," the first section of their works-in-progress piece *Moreechika: Season of Mirage* that explored the human impact of oil manufacturing. Using their new prop, dancers breathed inside of their individual parcels of plastic. With careful calculated movement, each began to spill out of their tarps by bursting elongated tongues out of their wide-open mouths, as if their bodies were submerged inside of a toxic substance that mutilated them from the inside out. The outstretched tongues executed by dancers reflected the image of the five transparent creatures that costume designer Anne K. Sullivan had constructed known as "hungry ghosts." With extended tongues, spooked mouths, and protruded bellies, hungry ghosts carried the burden of an insatiable hunger and thirst. Descriptions in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* help to illuminate the context of these hungry ghosts as anguished spirits that were reduced to the constrictions of unsatisfied craving.²⁹² According to the teachings of Padma Sambhava in this text, the only pathway to liberation was the "skillful transformation" of the ordinary states of human reality.²⁹³ The puppets were to be projected above the bodies of dancers during sections such as "Almost Gone" to reveal how the historical injustices ancestors had endured would continue to negatively impact contemporary life without rigorous action in the present.

My work with the hungry ghosts required that I reengage the previous research I had conducted as a “cultural activist” in ADT. Ananya Chatterjea insisted that ADT artists were “cultural activists” as they did not merely articulate other individual’s experiences; rather, she persuaded that ADT artists were expressing multiple stories on their own behalf.²⁹⁴ In 2006, I had become an apprentice dancer in ADT, training in Chatterjea’s aesthetic and participating in the series of roundtables that were organized for *Pipaashaa, Extreme Thirst*. Through the company’s collaboration with Cecilia Martinez and Shalini Gupta of the Women’s Environmental Institute, I learned about the high cases of arsenic that were being found in the soil of the community I had grown up in, namely Phillips neighborhood. Rehearsing in Ananya Chatterjea’s movement required that I find my relationship to the dance through my own history of growing up in a community that faced the challenges of environmental pollution.

Cultural activism was inherently autoethnographic because the process enabled a reconnection to lived experiences through movement. As Chatterjea noticed my growing interests in a specific part of *Moreechika* titled “Anchuri! Get Out!,” she urged me to take time to “write this autoethnography.”²⁹⁵ Taking up her suggestion would help me to illuminate Heewon Chang’s definition of cultural analysis as beginning with an intentional analysis of self and ending with an inquiry into the relationship between self and others.²⁹⁶ This particular section examined how Kichwa women and children in Ecuador had run continuously throughout their forests to protect their land from the possibilities of oil manufacturing.²⁹⁷ Every movement of “Anchuri!” constituted an act of empowerment as the awe-inspiring effects of sharp flexed feet and claw-like fingertips from Chhau and grounded warrior stances and precisely outstretched arms from yoga seemed to effectively annihilate any trace of a potentially threatening outsider. The future possibilities of being dislocated from land had been transformed into a compelling

memory of the impact of embodiment practice—in this case, the act of running and shouting “Get Out” to prevent the encroachment of oil corporations on indigenous lands.

As my cultural activist work became increasingly reflective of the autoethnographic method, I questioned whether I could pinpoint the intersection between my grandmother’s relationship to territory in the Mississippi Delta and indigenous claims to land. Tirso A. Gonzales and Melissa K. Nelson posited the challenges of development in contemporary native life as the ways globalization disrupted native communities’ relationship to land, arguing that the major political struggle of native communities today concerned their self-determination, land ownership, and control over resources.²⁹⁸ My grandmother had maintained an enduring attachment to her grandfather’s land loss that provided an explanation for how our family had been uprooted from Mississippi by Ku Klux Klan members in the 1920s. Her memories of her grandfather’s land ownership in Mississippi and her narratives of raising children in a sharecropping family in Louisiana had become a story that articulated our families’ history of exile in America.

At what point in the dance would my grandmother’s memory of exile in the U.S. meet the necessity of indigenous peoples’ claim to land? David Shorter argues that a critical engagement with political struggles is the act that bridges relationships with the contemporary realities of indigenous people.²⁹⁹ My community organizing activities in HIRE Minnesota had taught me about the impact of such solidarity, for this coalition had grown as a result of African American and Native American leaders in vocational education. Although, as this campaign focused entirely on jobs for people of color and low-income people, the question still remained about what kind of embodiment practice enabled indigenous peoples and diasporic peoples to connect across their historical experiences of land.

Collaboration, part two

From my questions about the politics of diaspora, I began to investigate the possibilities of embodiment practice in creating solidarity across historical differences. Heewon Chang describes how external data—or texts that fall outside the realm of personal perspective—allow autoethnographers to fill in the remaining gaps and to link personal stories to the outer and larger world.³⁰⁰ This suggestion to use textual data can be expanded to understand how embodiment plays a role in connecting the researcher to information that exceeds personal, self-analysis. ADT demonstrated the significance of cross-cultural alliances that prioritized embodiment processes. Chatterjea’s co-collaborator for *Moreechika*, Laurie Carlos, enhanced ADT’s creative process with her legendary history in American performance. Carlos is known most famously as the original composer of the Lady in Blue role in Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1975) that explored black women’s survival of physical and psychological abuse.³⁰¹ This collaboration between Carlos and Chatterjea expanded the company’s practice of transforming classical Indian dance by building alliances with an artist of the African diaspora who sought to deepen dancers’ emotional connections.

Collaborations that work across cultural, racial, and ethnic differences can also illuminate the complexities of artistic discipline. bell hooks describes how “counter-hegemonic art” produces creative works that challenge simplistic understandings of race and develop radical thinking about identity formation.³⁰² Chatterjea and Carlos demonstrate the difficulties of such artistic work that resists rigid notions of race, because of the sharp contrast in their comprehensions of racial politics. Chatterjea argues that her “politics are different than Laurie’s” because “Laurie refuses to have the race conversation.”³⁰³ Carlos describes how she knows white supremacy exists in terms of institutional practices but that she does not “internalize that mythology” because “it means you set yourself up in all of the symbols and accouterment that

white supremacy is supposed to happen;”³⁰⁴ rather, Carlos describes how working with “Ananya is important in terms of how we are both allowed to keep our discipline and our practice so that we can deepen and expand our knowledge.”³⁰⁵ Through collaborative work between these two artists, ADT becomes a space in which the strategies of re-vision that hooks examines can take place.³⁰⁶ For instance, Carlos led the company through an exercise designed to build individual and collective relationship to the choreography in *Moreechika*. Dancers forged a circle in the center of the studio space with their forearms lifted to their navel and palms facing out. The studio fell silent as dancers gazed out at one another and reached out their hands. From the breath engaged and eye contact circulated, Carlos’s exercise suggested that energy could be accessed in the space if dancers used their emotional life to do the work.³⁰⁷ Dancers functioned at the intersection between the personal and the lives of others connected to the work.

Cross-cultural engagement consists of a pedagogy that aims to embody processes of reinvention. In *Pedagogies of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire recommends using thought and action to recreate human realities, for as individuals objectify the society from which they emerge, they can comprehend the world and change it with their labor.³⁰⁸ The practice of objectification that Freire poses concerns how people must act and reflect on the reality to be transformed, must be in dialogue with others in order to name the challenges in their community, and must pose these problems as questions to be solved. Preparing to become the sole manipulator of the hungry ghosts for the impending world premiere of *Moreechika* in Trinidad and Tobago, I put into practice Carlos’s instruction on improvisational aesthetics and Chatterjea’s teachings of historical connections. While working one-on-one with Carlos to construct a narrative for the hungry ghosts, she advised me to engage the theatrical “jazz aesthetic” by refusing to land on a rigid, singular practice and instead focusing on experimentation and improvisation.³⁰⁹ In this

creative process of continuous reinvention, Carlos instructed me to keep exploring and to remember my history of dancing in pieces such as *Pipaashaa*, *Extreme Thirst* so that the puppets could participate in the work of breath and movement happening onstage.³¹⁰ Chatterjea described how I needed to visualize the broader piece occurring in my consciousness as the puppeteer, or the storyteller that articulates a moment in history through memory.³¹¹ For the world premiere in Trinidad, I needed to access these dynamics of improvisation and storytelling because I would start the show with a poem written by Laurie Carlos: “Where is Bhopal?/The refinery blew up in the night/Turn on the water/Fire/Fire down the drain/Hair on fire/Greasy palms.”³¹² As the puppeteer, I engaged a practice of continuous recreation that fit within ADT’s pedagogical practices in which the alliance between Carlos and Chatterjea enabled African American stories to be expressed alongside contemporary Indian dance movement. Cross-cultural intersections involved a continuous reinterpretation of personal experience.

The experimental possibilities of movement—rather than the mere perpetuation of traditional standards—support processes of building solidarity with artists in different diasporic communities. On July 27, ADT debuted *Moreechika* for the New Waves Dance and Performance Institute at the National Academy for the Performing Arts in Trinidad and Tobago. Choreographer and educator Makeda Thomas designed this two-week Institute so that diverse artists from different parts of the globe would gather in Trinidad to critically engage with contemporary movement in a Caribbean context.³¹³ For instance, Tony Hall’s “Jouvay” method used improvisation, theatre, and self-narration to help participants make critical discoveries about the role of storytelling in their everyday lives. We marched in a tightly packed circle holding extended, wooden sticks, stopped suddenly at the noise of each others’ collective growls to pause on grounded feet, and met the eyes of the person across from our bodies to challenge

them to a fierce duel.³¹⁴ Following these activities, we gathered in a circle to reconfigure stories connected to our experiences as a practice of finding the significance of such archetypes in everyday existence.³¹⁵ Hall's Jouway method illuminated the context of the celebrations of emancipated slaves whose embodiment of African practices in the nineteenth century eventually combined with enfranchised former South Asian indentured laborers, allowing different cultural practices in the public venues of Trinidad to express diverse community values and artistic creativity.³¹⁶ The different movement practices connected to communities of color could be reconstructed in order to comprehend how human agents negotiated the dynamics of their citizenship in the contemporary world.³¹⁷

Embodiment plays an important role in focusing conversations about globalization on person's everyday actions in local communities across the world. In the New Waves Institute roundtable discussion "Transnational Body Histories & a Mapping of the Future," Chatterjea discussed the limitless possibilities for building transnational coalitions in the Caribbean if we begin to see ourselves outside the lens of dominant culture.³¹⁸ Some distinctions between the terms "transnational" and "diaspora" must be articulated because the former concerns the flow of ideas, capital and people across national regions in a manner that disturbs the rigid structures of identity and political and social structures whereas diaspora speaks specifically to the forced and voluntary movements of persons across different nation-states.³¹⁹ Transnationalism brings awareness to the larger forces of global capital and diaspora is a term used to address the dislocations of persons across the world.³²⁰ With these definitions considered, the term "diaspora" can be examined within the dynamics of global capitalism because diasporic communities are structured by the ideological, financial, political, and national flows that the transnational movement of migrants create.³²¹ Building alliances across diaspora can constitute

an embodied process of continuing to recreate understandings of histories of dislocation whereas transnational coalitions intend to reinvent connections for the purposes of examining the conflicts and opportunities of global citizenship. Diasporic lives help to frame understandings of global forces by continuously remembering and reinterpreting histories of exile as part of how we negotiate the inextricable relationship between local and global in the contemporary moment.

Through an embodied practice of critically recreating our historical understandings, persons in the diaspora can begin to work across the borders of cultural, racial, and ethnic politics associated with their lived experience. Following M. Jacqui Alexander's examination of such embodied work as a practice of relationality, my grandmother's story was connected to a cross-cultural history of struggle that needed to be reinterpreted for upcoming generations. For example, ADT artist Hui Wilcox engaged with the hungry ghosts as their big bellies signified what occurred when the body was starving or suffering from eating unhealthy food. Her grandmother had endured multiple famines in China and began storing bags of grain, rice and flour in the uncertainty of whether such a travesty might resurface.³²² She 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."³²³ Moreover, her connection to the hungry ghosts was deeply rooted in her work in the company as well as her 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."³²⁴ When rehearsing with the hungry ghosts, Wilcox's two daughters sat with me, observing, sometimes demonstrating their own skills with the puppets. Embodiment can be a rigorous engagement with personal histories through a creative practice that forges alliances across cultural borders.

Conclusion

Ananya Chatterjea and David Roussève create choreographic work through the lived experiences of diasporic communities. Chatterjea continuously reinterprets Indian dance forms in order to produce a cross-cultural dialogue about the environmental crises faced by women across the globe. Roussève uses his family's histories of African American labor in the US South as content for his pieces that examine how artistic traditions might be transformed to unsettle the rigid social politics of contemporary life. Through these kinds of creative processes, I understand how cross-cultural engagement can constitute an embodied inquiry into the lived experiences of diverse communities in the diaspora.

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