MOVING BODIES, NAVIGATING CONFLICT: PRACTICING BHARATA NATYAM IN COLOMBO, SRI LANKA

by Ahalya Satkunaratnam. 2020. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press. 200 pp., 9 photos. $22.95 paper. ISBN: 9780819578907
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Moving Bodies is a detailed and critical examination of the role of the South Indian classical dance form bharatanatyam in the context of war-torn Sri Lanka, specifically as practiced in the capital city, Colombo. Drawing on choreographic analysis, dance ethnography and dance history, Satkunaratnam traces the rise and evolution of bharatanatyam within Colombo, and the different roles and resonances that the dance form has sustained in the face of a changing and frequently violent political backdrop. While there are growing bodies of scholarship considering the history and role of bharatanatyam in India and beyond, as well as reflecting on the history and significance of the twenty-six-year Sri Lankan civil war, apart from an excellent article by martial artist and scholar Janet O'Shea (2016), there is no work hitherto that has brought these two areas of enquiry together. Satkunaratnam's book fills this gap.

At the heart of the book is a reflection on the construction of identity, a process that takes on a particular urgency and significance in the context of a "time and place" made "dangerously transient" by war (46). Key to her discussion is a commitment to understanding identity as inherently fluid, following cultural theorist Homi Bhabha's insistence on culture as "transnational and translational" (21). At times of war, she argues, the space for the recognition of cultures as shifting and hybridized is submerged by the desire for a fixed cultural signifier that can serve as an identitarian rallying point. The first half of the book considers ways in which "bodies and movement" (6) are represented and refracted in ways beyond their control to serve the specific ideologies and institutions of politics and state. The second half looks at ways that dancers and choreographers negotiate and challenge such imposed identities, reasserting agency through choreographies of resistance.

In this way, Satkunaratnam records how bharatanatyam has been classified variously as "Oriental," "Indian," "indigenous," and "Tamil," depending on the differing agendas and contexts of those imposing the classifications. She highlights, for example, how the experience of the vicious anti-Tamil riots in July of 1983 ("Black July") "inscribed [bharatanatyam] with significance as a uniquely Tamil practice" in the face of "institutional, national and social exclusion" (49). She shows how, since 1972, bharatanatyam has been included within the mandatory "aesthetics" module of Sri Lankan state education, as a signifier, she suggests, of a Sri Lanka that is "multicultural" and accepting of diversity. And yet, a little probing reveals the limits of this inclusion and the extent to which it can serve to contribute still further to segregation along ethnic lines and an ultimate positioning of bharatanatyam as "Other."

In the second half of the book, she explores how creative choreography can subvert the very fixity that nationalism clings to, permitting a sense of choice in a space and time where there can be little or no choosing" (7). Drawing on Diana Taylor's distinction between the "archive" and the "repertoire," she shows how a seemingly unexceptional choice to stage an "often excerpted" (80) section of the Mahabharata (drawing on the familiarity of the archive) can be used to critique the present without the danger of explicit protest. Following the well-known archival narrative, the piece *Draupadhi Sabatham* highlighted "the suffering of civil society" (89), whereby an innocent woman is victimized due to the cruel and irresponsible actions of two opposing factions of "the same family" (85). Any parallels with the brutality and the weaponization of rape in the civil war are left for the audience to draw for themselves, though for Satkunaratnam, the echoes with the contemporary situation are compelling. Against the backdrop of "white van syndrome" (89) and a growing number of "disappearances" of perceived dissenters, the appeal of a critique of the abuse of power focused on a canonical story is clear.

Other danced interventions that can be seen to disrupt or question the status quo include the hard-won inclusion of a piece privileging bharatanatyam within the Sri Lankan TV show *Shakthi Superstar*, navigating the demands for the more immediately accessible forms of

"Bollywood" and "Kollywood."[1] A debut bharatanatyam performance (*arangetram*) is staged jointly for both a Tamil and a Sinhalese bharatanatyam dancer, closing with a piece, *Shanti*, that emphasises the common suffering experienced as a result of war, and the common desire for 'Shanti' (peace), invoked in both Tamil and Sinhala.

While Satkunaratnam celebrates such initiatives, particularly the centrality of women in both sustaining bharatanatyam teaching and performance and in using the form to question present realities and possible futures, she equally finds herself wondering about the genuine impact and effectiveness of such critiques, such interethnic collaborations, and performances. How far does the creative agency explored in the second half of the book really escape the pervasive grip of political representation and institutional definition discussed in the first half? As an example, a joint arangetram for the two bharatanatyam dancers, one Tamil and one Sinhalese, can seem like a radical step toward the breaking down of embodied boundaries. Yet, while the two dancers had spent "every day together in the lead up to the arangetram," when she interviewed them both several weeks after the event, "they hadn't seen each other since" (101). Similarly, while the framework of multiculturalism (such as that used in the arangetram's closing piece *Shanti*) emphasises the parity of the cultural experience of being Tamil and being Sinhalese, the reality is one of very different license, privilege, and expectation. *Shanti* could be perceived as falling into the common trap of multiculturalism, keeping the representation of bodies of different ethnicity "separate and 'equal' when in fact the practice of living, performing, and moving are [*sic*] varied and uneven" (99).

Moving Bodies is a rich exploration of the significance of bharatanatyam performance in Colombo, which interrogates throughout the contingency of identity and the limits of agency, particularly as positioned against the licensed lawlessness of war. There are parts of the book that leave me wanting to know more. Why is it, for example, that in Satkunaratnam's survey, "none of the Tamil medium schools offered Kandyan dance" (67)? Several possible reasons come to mind, yet it would be interesting to hear these reasons articulated by school leaders themselves. Equally, what led "some" of the Sinhala medium schools to offer both "Bharatanatyam and Kandyan dance" (67)? A possible limitation of the work attaches to the demographic researched in the study—private bharatanatyam practice in Colombo, as Satkunaratnam admits, citing ethnographer Susan Reed, is largely sustained by the wealthy elites, whether Sinhalese or Tamil (122). How much does the practice of bharatanatyam mean to the majority, who lie beyond this select group? While Satkunaratnam argues that the teaching of bharatanatyam in (free) state schools is very rudimentary, often no more than repeating what many students have "typically learned in the first three years of classes with a private teacher" (69), what is the significance of such tuition for those unable to afford a private class? Satkunaratnam's original intention had been to examine the practise of bharatanatyam more widely across Sri Lanka—an examination which would necessarily have shifted the demographic of the study. This was prevented by the "escalation of the war" (6). In some senses, therefore, this book itself manifests some of the constraints of war that it discusses.

Asking the same question that Satkunaratnam poses about the impact that any dance training or performance can make against the destructively linear narrative of war, O'Shea reflects that training with others, or in forms that traverse tight ethnic groupings can "allow(s) for communication across ethnic boundaries … that might extend beyond dance training" (2016, 128). Dance continues to offer, she posits, "the possibility of rethinking narratives … even where conflict has overtaken compromise" (128). This book, in its embrace of the messiness of identity, in its highlighting of the overlapping and interweaving of cultural practice, in its attention to choreographies of subversion, contributes to such a "rethinking of narratives."

A final note from the book itself. In her conclusion, Satkunaratnam draws attention to a poster that formed part of the "Bring Back the Child campaign" against the recruitment of child soldiers. In it, the head of a saluting child soldier is superimposed on the body of a young bharatanatyam dancer, thereby bringing together "two ubiquitous representations of Sri Lankan Tamil girl hood—soldier and dancer" (129). In fact, as Satkunaratnam shows, it is not only the child soldier but also the (child) dancer who can be weaponized, exploited, and

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confined within the "service . . . of nationalism" (1). And the challenge for Sri Lanka—and indeed for us all—is to free our children, our dance forms, and our dancers from such confines.

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Work Cited

O'Shea, Janet. 2016. "From Temple to Battlefield. Bharatanatyam in the Sri Lankan Civil War." In *Choreographies of 21st Century Wars*, edited by Gay Morris and Jens Richard Giersdorf, 111–132. Oxford Studies in Dance Theory. New York: Oxford University Press. Oxford Scholarship Online.

Note

1. Popular "filmi" dance seen to have originated from the filmmaking center of Chennai, Tamilnadu, rather than Mumbai (formerly Bombay).

PRAGMATIST PHILOSOPHY AND DANCE: INTERDISCIPLINARY DANCE RESEARCH IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

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Eric Mullis provides a rigorous demonstration of interdisciplinary scholarship, merging performance theory with theology, philosophy, and autoethnographic and historical research methodologies. Mullis's *Pragmatist Philosophy and Dance: Interdisciplinary Dance Research in the American South* addresses the value of combining research modalities and drawing on embodied research as part of a process model of dance philosophy. Mullis examines ecstatic states within Appalachian charismatic Pentecostal churches and the ethics of researching and representing these traditions through performance.

His work differs from recent publications on dance and philosophy in its emphasis on pragmatism and somaesthetics. For example, *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Dance and Philosophy* (Farinas and Van Camp 2021) and *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*'s December 2019 issue dedicated to dance philosophy feature a wide range of philosophical topics, theories, and methodologies, including Mullis's discussion of political dance and Richard Shusterman's somaesthetic perspectives. Mullis's monograph brings a renewed focus on pragmatism, which has been overwhelmed in the American context by phenomenological, analytic, and continental philosophical approaches. However, *Pragmatist Philosophy* shares a focus on philosophical approaches to dance and religion with Kimerer LaMothe's *Between Dancing and Writing: The Practice of Religious Studies* (2004) and an emphasis on relationships between dance and religion with Sam Gill's *Dancing Culture Religion* (2012). Simultaneously, Mullis draws attention to autoethnographic methodologies in the dance field, aligning with work such as the edited collection *Fields in Motion: Ethnography in the Worlds of Dance* (Davida 2011), Karen Schupp's (2017) autoethnographic studies of dance competition culture, and Lliane Loots's (2016) "The Autoethnographic Act of Choreography," to name but a few.

Pragmatist Philosophy and Dance's interdisciplinarity governs its structure, offering a journey that feels, at times, segmented by research modalities and disciplinary methodologies, while drawing varied methodologies into dialogue with one another across eight chapters. Pentecostalism and charismatic states link autoethnographic field notes to philosophy, choreographic analysis, and religious history. Chapter 1 performatively enacts a historical and pragmatist justification for autobiography as a valid form of philosophical inquiry, while also conveying Mullis's positionality within his ethnographic research of Southern Pentecostal churches. Beginning with an autoethnography of Mullis's journey to choreographing *Later Rain* and its development into formal sections that also function as standalone performances (*Paw Creek, This Falls to Us,* and *The Land of Nod*), he provides theoretical, religious historical, and methodological background before closing with a standard outline of chapters.

Mullis frames the book's remaining structure around issues arising from his creation of *Later Rain* and its stand-alone sections,