

## **Writing out otherness<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*Increasingly, global–local situations call for theory to honour culturally diverse discourses and histories. This article is concerned with the ways that critical writings affect material concerns of dancers. The article stages crises of alterity; writing from the underside, I call attention to the need to acknowledge multiple subjectivities and locations. Alterity compels Asian artists to negotiate whiteness as praxis, and as theories of performance. However, even as writings valorize resistance and interventions of performance, by what theories are we restraining performers?<sup>2</sup> Is the dancer-as-subaltern<sup>3</sup> always to be the data that validates western theory and theorizing – regardless of the origin and commitments of the writer? How may the other, redefine himself or herself and be heard? I attend to the discomforts of participant-observation when writing about performances; to the discomforts produced by dichotomizing gazes on bodies that perform nationality. I attend to the performance of pluralities of Asianness from within the glass walls of a hothouse inside Euro-American dance discourse. Much has been said about intertexts and performance, but what about tacit knowledge that flies below the radar of ‘the cultural’?<sup>4</sup> We need to consider intracultural epistemologies of perception such as the Natya Shastra discourses. This article asks how do we write non-violently so that identities can travel amidst moving spaces, cultural, personal, theoretical, performative spaces.*

### **Keywords**

alterity

ethnoscapes

subaltern

Asianness

intertext

Natya Shastra

In the early 1990s I wrote about contemporary Indian dance of the 1980s, work that was already situated by the media, and cultural discourses as lying between polarized worlds of tradition and modernism – I wondered how this could be so, since the dances displayed ‘traditional’ techniques as much as they were informed by fresh and current perspectives. I struggled to sort out what was ‘universal’ and what was culture specific and for whom. At this time, transitioning from performance to writing, I vaguely sensed that in writing I might betray my performer colleagues, and thereby unknowingly perpetrate invisible unnamed acts of violence, but blundered on anyway. Again, later, in July–August 1999 along with fellow participant-observers at the Asian Pacific Performers Exchange (APPEX), at UCLA, I contemplated critical distance and cultural transparency.<sup>5</sup> Between sessions a distinctive but intense body experience alerted me to attend to a discomfort that had had no name. I began to see the glass walls (not a ceiling) of Euro-American dance discourse. The sensation came back, two months later, when I heard that one of my colleagues, and one of the subjects of my dissertation, had been

found hanging in a bedroom after her performance in a theatre of the NCPA in my home territory. This is where I had directed the dance programme in Mumbai, the city where I had lived. In our last correspondence (letter dated 16 February 1996) she had charged me to amend what I had written about her, with a list of clarifications, and a directive to respond to ‘the magnitude of your responsibility’. I am still dealing with that charge.

Ranjabati Sircar’s final act in October 1999 was widely reported. At age 36,<sup>6</sup> Sircar was already a celebrated Indian intercultural performer.<sup>7</sup> Her career had not lacked awards, recognition or invitations to perform, teach and choreograph in the United Kingdom, India and even Africa. It has been said that she was overwhelmed by the organizational, financial and political aspects of performance, especially after the sudden demise of her father<sup>8</sup> and during the terminal illness of her mother. Ranja (pronounced Ronja) is described as charismatic and brilliant by fellow students in her college.<sup>9</sup> Here I recollect that she actually turned down a Rhodes Fellowship to Oxford University, among other offers in the United Kingdom, because of her conviction that she would play a significant role in defining a new cosmopolitan and global Indian identity through her Navanritya (literally new dance).<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, news coverage and obituaries focused patronizingly on the psychological problems of liberated talented women (Vasudev 2002),<sup>11</sup> and on her personal inability to negotiate the cut-throat dance scene. Her friend, Paul Ben-Itzak mused upon the high personal cost for performers as Sircar, along with Roger Sinha, Sean Curran and Mark Dendy, when their creative excavations of interior landscapes are constantly confronted with derogatory social perceptions of dance (Ben-Itzak 2000; Kalidas 1999). While I was clear that my writing (unpublished dissertation) could not

possibly have been a direct or single precipitant in Ranja's crisis, the event weighs on me to actively address the crisis of performing contemporary Indianness in not just a global arena dominated by whiteness, but from the space of internalized whiteness struggling with tacit non-verbal knowledges outside the white discourses (Srinivasan 2003; Shome 1999). I do agree with Ben-Itzak's suggestion that institutionalized discourses contributed in a profound complex way to her 'depression' that is supposedly the 'cause' of her final act.

I want to make it also clear that Ranja's is not the only body that instigates my need to stage the invisible engagement of a performing body with discourse. It is not only Ranja's body that becomes the stage, the site of sati, i.e. willing offering of self to the fire of social acceptance. This article is an attempt to grapple with what I had been noticing over several years in the work and journeys of colleagues performing Indian dance interculturally. It is my argument that the issues of identity and representation that deeply impacted Ranja's state, also impact the state of my Asian performer colleagues, as they constantly transition between national, multicultural and global paradigms, and markets where funding and critical recognition are always the stakes. Ranja's sacrifice dramatizes the urgency of sorting out the implications.

Astad Deboo yearns for a kind of performative absence:

Maybe this world is another planet's hell. And then away from the murky gloomy world we inhabit there is this yearning someplace-somewhere to slip into quietness.... (2003)

The consummate and articulate dancer and LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender) activist Aniruddhan Vasudevan describes himself as ‘a brahmin boy from Kumbakonam (Tamil Nadu) with parents who had strong anti-brahminical and anti-casteist personalities, a boy who was beginning to understand that he desired boys, a Hindu boy with strong misgivings about religion and nationalism’ (2008). Vasudevan has spoken of how much he had enjoyed dancing Bharatanatyam for years, until he came across the recent revisionist narratives its complicated history of wars fought on the battleground of the dancers’ bodies. These theorizations left him gasping, pushing him towards re-definitions and re-theorizations of self and practice (Vasudevan 2008).<sup>12</sup> He writes ‘within the politics of caste, nationalism, gender, sexuality and religiosity was the specific locus of quiet but disabling anxiety for me, in three different languages...’ (Vasudevan 2008).

April 2008, I watched Akram Khan, British and of Bangladeshi parents, negotiate his first- and third-world identities through an amazing work that incorporates kathak abhinaya techniques with postmodern dance and narrative techniques. In *Zero Degrees*, as the narrator-choreographer, Khan recalls seeing a corpse on a train from Dacca (Bangladesh) to Kolkatta (India). Soon his British passport is taken from him, so that he effectively loses nationality, safety of personhood, and with it, his identity. The trauma of this train ride with anonymity and death is staged by Khan’s seemingly autonomous body that virtuosically convulsed in tremors in the climactic ending. Then Khan was slung onto the shoulder of his collaborator Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, his sakha/companion in the story and carried offstage. Then, the cosmopolitan and diverse New York audience, stood unanimously and spontaneously to applaud, so enacting a communal response of

affirmation, support and healing! Perhaps they recognized his terror of losing identity ([Jowitt 2008](#)), or like myself, perhaps they were responding to how his body responded.

### **Competing heritages**

Addressing questions about identity, an earlier generation of post-Independence dancers from the subcontinent such as, for example, Padma Subrahmanyam, Sircar, her mother, Manjushri Chaki-Sircar, Chandralekha, Mrinalini Sarabhai, studied yoga and the Sanskrit texts to mine pre-colonial structures of embodiment and art practice. In the ancient texts, sculptures, architecture, musical and oral structures, they found counter constructs of depth, complexity and beauty – a soothing salve for colonial wounds. The sequence of categories of bodily positions, movements and gesture vocabularies of the Natya Shastra discourse in various regional versions, are embedded in current praxis, and as criteria for contemplating and generating performance. Dancers excavating a pre-colonial Indianness are still enthralled by a kind of ‘archive fever’ (Derrida 1995) as they layer what they inherited with what they find. But a chasm divides their embodied research from research in dance studies, where scholarship in Indian dance is confined to areas of cultural anthropology, or the study of disembodied ancient texts (indology), or postmodern theorizations of peep-hole events.

Correspondingly, students today find only constricted discursive access ways to deeply alive structures and theories of performance.<sup>13</sup> Discourses accrue significance as their theories are reiterated. But in the space of hegemonies, each reiteration of one theory also puts another theory at risk (Butler 1997).<sup>14</sup> A history of nationalist dance discourse retrieving complex performative issues on constructing affect, is being overwritten. I do not make this observation with the agenda of reinstating one hegemony over another

(Butler 1997), but rather to argue for more ways of traversing beyond disciplines as competitive, towards disciplines as complementary.

### **Binaries materialize otherness**

It is more than 30 years since Edward Said's classic book *Orientalism* suggested that the European will-to-power is not just embedded, it actually structures technologies of making knowledge, of thinking, of studying human beings (Said 1978; Geertz 1988; Foucault). Since then many have redefined the technologies of fieldwork, addressed matters of describing dance, authorship, location and so on. Many have addressed the problems of the dialectics of either objectivizing or essentializing, or of subjective particularism. There is the problem that resistance becomes co-opted by being incorporated into the argument or dissolved by acknowledgement; the problem that all resistive arguments end up only reifying the authority of dominant representation, because they are resistive;<sup>15</sup> the problem that if resistive arguments do not speak the dominant narrative, there will be no communication across divides (Keane 2003).

Still despite all this recent discourse, when it comes to dancing bodies, global media and local lore persist in generating assurance to demands for an 'other' (see Said 1978; Geertz 1988). Despite the noblest intentions, discursive gazes are enmeshed with whiteness and in the 'othering' at many levels: psychoanalytic, cultural and social. Based upon her experience of anthropological research in the Phillipines,(1992) Sally Ann Ness has drawn attention to those instances in cross-cultural research where 'the dance-object fails to represent the researcher's understanding...' (1994), instances where the researcher is thrown up against the wall of her inability to transcend her own

constructions of knowing. For Ness, these instances signal the limits of the cross-cultural translation project, the participant-observer gap. Ness suggests the possibility that *the researcher might never really know*. So then, how shall the ‘other’ negotiate an authoritative discourse that generates the rules for defining the other, while simultaneously acknowledging that by definition the other is unknowable? How does a performer of Indian new dance begin to interrogate otherness from this underside of duality? A location in multiply inscribed alterity allows the artist only the choice between confronting or conforming. Consider this option for artistic expression in comparison to the palette of choices of subject in contemporary dance.

Since the body is so central to dancing, dancers carry the burden of the body as not mind, the burden of the body as an intracultural other (see Novak 1995<sup>16</sup>). Then the mechanism of critically observing performance, also others,<sup>17</sup> so any live performer is doubly othered. Then it follows that the Asian dancer is quadruply inscribed with otherness. If the dancer is not male, then othering increases in geometric progression. Then what about the Asian intercultural performer who reflects (with difference) the otherness of more than one culture to more than one culture? The direction of this exploration only allows binaries to proliferate to the nth level. So, is the intercultural Asian non-male dancer doomed to be trapped forever in the gap between image and experience, objectivized in performance, erased or generated only within the boundaries of current dominant symbolic discourse, marked by gender, nationality and global powers. If performing Asianness is so intensely othered, why do it at all? Surely, it would be better to abort the next female foetus before it becomes a woman dancing.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, a similar image does surface in the writing of the celebrated British choreographer Shobhana Jeyasingh on the consequences to her creativity of the demand that she address the expectations of a dominant (outsider) perspective of Indian dance: ‘It is a sensation of being a baby wanting to be born but being pushed back into the uterus, of not being allowed to be born. “You cannot come out says the midwife”’ (1998: 47).

Dance studies may celebrate individual performances that transcend repressive circumstances, however brief and evanescent the intervention. In the long run, however, capitalist and world market notions of popularity as indicators of artistic success, impact which choreographer actually gets to work, and for how long (Sporton 2004).<sup>19</sup> Artists from the developing world can live only by negotiating the Euro-American imaginary.<sup>20</sup> Survival complicates identity and meaning.<sup>21</sup> Recognition at home is secured when there is recognition abroad. So even at home strangeness materializes. Self-as-strange is naturalized right within the heart as it were of the source country, as repetitive discourses and media, as other-fulfilling prophecies of authenticity enter into and participate in the local imaginary.<sup>22</sup>

In diasporic communities outside the country of origin, the immigrant’s sense of self and relationship to source culture is remediated by yet another set of local cultural percepts. (Arjun Appadurai has described as ‘ethnoscapes’ the identity-culture formations that arise when projections of ‘ethnicities’ are internalized by those being described.) Third, there is the interaction between diasporic self-representations and source culture. Shanti Pillai (2002) has argued that the practice of Bharatanatyam outside of Chennai, exerts economic and aesthetic pressures upon the performances in Chennai, a twentieth-century source site for this form. Chennai-based post-traditionalist Chandralekha would

complain of losing her dancers to dance companies based in the United Kingdom where they would be assured better incomes and working circumstances. For Asian intercultural artists, the political *is* personal as their careers and lives are impacted by macro geopolitical gazes that specularize their micro body surfaces and determine how and what talents will be funded.

As soon one aesthetic canon is resituated, it has already brought its own boundaries and frames into dialogue with other local histories and geoculturally distant practices. The question is, will it remain a two-way dialogue or degenerate into statements about somebody's other? In Khan's *Zero Degrees* he and Cherkaoui simultaneously perform abhinaya, except, we notice that their supposedly independent spontaneous narratives are in fact perfectly synchronized! The spontaneous 'natural' is exposed as artifice, as carefully memorized and planned! Continuing their simultaneous monologues, Khan and Cherkaoui launch into postmodern movement sanchari (i.e. variations spun off the original narration). We watch meaning being drained as Khan decontextualizes gestures transforming them into abstract activities. Then he recontextualizes (re-bodies) them as tropes of multi-armed mithuna (tantric partners in lovemaking). He materializes discursive conventions as choreographic processes in postmodern and in classical Indian theatre. The postmodern and the shastric highlight each other as they flow on. And I see and attempt to describe his work through a shastric lens in English. If such complex interweavings of hitherto incompatible traditions are possible in dance, then why not in discourses.

## **Interrogating unitary wholeness**

Within dance studies, wonderful writings exploring improvisation and intracultural Euro-American choreography have tracked and acknowledged the role of the active body-with-mind in research and writing, of the ways that sensations and emotions enter into play with movement qualities and spaces (see Albright and Gere 2003). Susan Leigh Foster not only finds a way to integrate the personal, the bodily and the social with critical theory, but opens the door to include notions of karma in dance discourse via her discussion of bodies written upon and writing. Writing dance today already calls for an interplay of the ethnographer's training and body, with content, socio-political contexts (Foster 1995, 1996, 2002; Dixon Gottschild 1997; Martin 1997), disciplinary frames, process, interruptions, continuities and situational attributes.

Despite all this, it is still widely held that art-making has the most impact when it demonstrates an integrated structure, a singular perspective. This is the ideal that still informs most Eurocentric approaches to writing, doing research, making art. It promises a unitary state of plenitudinous being, and argues that the struggle to arrive at this place of (singular) focus furthers disciplines, i.e. that only the assimilated has integrity.<sup>23</sup> Discussing this issue at the Millennium Dance Conference, I proposed that a majority discourse of fertile hyphenated subjectivities, needs to be reinstated in a central place in writing performance.<sup>24</sup>

The hyphen offers a space of dual or more perspectives. The split subject and the hybrid is and is not her other. S/he knows both subject and object positions, insider and outsider spaces. Hybridity as content and

form signals an inclusive non-intrusive acceptance of differences. Hybridity, as a performative location acknowledges dual or multiple simultaneous subjectivities that need not be reconciled within a single paternal frame. Hybridity [as structure] does not demand erasure or othering. (Coorlawala 2001: 93)

I was asked if I intended to imply ‘that those who are not hybrid and colonized should stop writing about “others” or those who are?’.<sup>25</sup> Indeed that *is* the gist of my argument. (Who is not colonized or split?) As Judith Butler (1999) interrogates the impossibility of destabilizing the foundational, she too points out that insistence on a single coherent stable category inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category. I argued there, that hybridity and its opposite, integral wholeness and critical distance are simply perspectives.<sup>26</sup> It is no longer a matter of refining the technologies of fieldwork, description and exegesis but simply of shifting perspectives. Nowhere is this need more crucial than in dealing with representations of the dancing body and negotiations of identity.

But is hybridity the answer? Seductive as it might be to glide into third-term yogic states, or to use hyphenations as bridges over yawning chasms, the notion of third term is itself predicted against the pre-existences of binaries as categories of organizing experience. Are binaries with their third terms still inevitable?

### **Multiple cultures, multiple gazes**

What happens when a performer reflects (with difference) the otherness of more than one culture to more than one culture? In 1999, at APPEX in University of California, Los

Angeles, as a writing fellow, I had the opportunity to observe just that. Here, performing artists at varying points on their career trajectories, of varied disciplines, and degrees of 'Asianness' met intensively over six weeks to collaborate on producing performance. As I attempt to encapsulate what I take from the APPEX experiment (surely not the first in intercultural exchanges where multiple cultures are cited), I will argue that representation needs to acquire more dimensions.<sup>27</sup>

The entry of so many dance cultures into proximity with each other, and within the English language, cries out for ways to acknowledge and include hitherto separated perceptions of perception and without homogenizing their processes or codes.<sup>28</sup> In tandem with the proliferation of academic disciplines, cultural knowledges are continuously transforming and carry their own impulse to inter-spawn. I will go on to argue that identities are neither fixed nor fluid, but continually reconstituted as they relocate themselves along spatial and temporal continuums of relationship to circumstances which are themselves also always transforming.

At APPEX 1999, participant activities started with verbal and performed self-presentations followed by workshops for each other, and collaborations on generating performance (Coorlawala 2003).<sup>29</sup> Asianness or relationship with performative Asianness was one of the qualifying criteria for participation. Here, Asianness was being embodied by performers from East Asia, South Asia and artists from the United States, who were engaged with the performance practices of these countries. The initial round of self-introductions foregrounded personal and aesthetic locations within sociocultural and disciplinary boundaries. This was followed by workshops that elicited observations and questions on national cultural properties, modernity, heritage, exile and self-construction.

Finally, while artists worked in smaller self-selected groups on explorations of mutual concern, they delved into linguistic and performative translation and collaborative construction.

As participants presented and taught colleagues their selected techniques of traditional, postmodern and modern forms, they were, in fact, negotiating several modalities. The workshops in particular called for all participants to continually make choices.

Participants were called upon to choose between editing and including, presenting and observing, being, reifying or breaking out, analysing and empathizing, supporting and being supported, offering and withdrawing, constructing and deconstructing, differentiating and abstracting.

The choices had to be rapidly made, and were instantly on display. Decisions were not just about relations in time, space, effort and energy allocations. Complicated histories of desire, cultural performance and categorization also weighed in. For example, movement vocabulary choices indicated cultures, whereas reliance on specific syntaxes of movement indicated a more generic level of aesthetic allegiances. Enclosing our workshop space of pan-Asian community was the reality of our location at UCLA in the midst of whiteness (Shome 1999), American funding for our activities and question of what we would produce for the larger global market. New works and texts emerged or dissolved while awareness of both being and consequence was intensified by a looming sense of ‘after APPEX’ opportunities that might ensue or evaporate as a result of the choices.

Participating and observing, we shuttled ostensibly between multiple Asian ethnicities, but actually whiteness was never ‘outside’. On the contrary, it mediated Asian

difference at the same time that the intra-Asian activities unsettled my sense of place and customary gaze.<sup>30</sup> We switched gazes in rapid internal succession and in fact faster than thinking in words and translations (De Spain 2003). As the activities (often overlapping) progressed, participants shuttled between individual self, national self and generic Asian-self, all competing for authenticity of experience and authenticity as validation. A dynamic web of geopolitical affiliations and artistic hegemonies emerged. Despite the outer silence of the focused participants, few spaces remained neutral.

As participant, I too became aware of how the rapid micro-immersions into one neighbouring Asian culture after another within an American institution, intensified my desire to see my own culture here and in this context. Discussions of desire and representation have extensively explored the impossibility of self-seeing and how this lack fuels desire to see and show the other<sup>31</sup> (Phelan 1993; Gaines 1988). So, where was my other in all this churning? As I recognized traces of the Indic aesthetic and sensibility in the work of the performers from Java, Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar and yes, even China, this desire for self-seeing was both fulfilled and held in abeyance, partially deferred. Resituated by dint of India's historic relationship with the dance traditions of the Sanskritic diaspora in East Asia, the word 'dominant' took on a new reality for me, the privilege of seeing one's own self in representations of others.<sup>32</sup>

Moving nine years forward to another performance in the same season in April 2008 by Khan, offers answers to my queries as to how those APPEX contradictions could be resolved as performance. Dodging traditional constraints while also drawing upon their histories, Khan and also several other artists negotiate disciplines, cultures and gender by juxtaposition, citations and transformations. They generate systems within and

against systems, reinforce or disrupt audience expectations. In Khan's *Bahok*, intense performers with highly technical and diverse skills reveal multiple sociocultural locations and undersides of otherness via the staged metaphor of an airport lounge. With dancers from China, Korea, India, South Africa and Spain, the choreography presents the individual or culture-specific dance qualities, alongside western contemporary and classical dance moves. As they wait in limbo in a space evacuated of cultural specificity, we learn about various individual body-histories of comfort and discomfort. Intense desires and existential discomforts are revealed by the danced and spoken texts of each personality. As a result, we get a sense of several disenfranchised travellers exposing their experiences of alterity while waiting for their homebound flights. Alistair Spalding, artistic director of Sadlers Wells, suggested that the choreography could serve as a metaphor for Khan's own displaced life in the United Kingdom since *Bahok* means carrier in Bengali.

In *Bahok*, waiting at the airport drives the action, just as anticipation drives all the (female) gopis in the *Rasa Leela-s* to dance. The *Bahok* narrative may not address transcendent love, but a *similar structure of* anticipation and alterity drives the work. In *Rasa Leelas*, the anticipated One (male), Krishna, may or may not come. The planes do not arrive. Statements of identity have been made, but there has been no resolution, no judgement. Unlike his climactic work, *Zero Degrees*, described earlier, here in *Bahok*, closure arrives temporarily with the insight that there will be none.

Reflexive performers play with image and experience, material and imaginary, self and audience, rasa theory and postmodernism, teasing out their relationships. Sheetal

Gandhi, born in California of South Asian parents, is so sensitive to the contingent and layered aspects of her own sense of self, that when she started choreographing she found it difficult to identify her individual self. She writes:

‘My understanding of Self, in many ways represented Self, reflected off of Other...’. ‘Whether the woman is one, or many, is irrelevant because regardless, she is connected to all that came before her and all that come after her. Whether influenced by blood or karma or something else entirely, we are more than our selves at any given moment. That this idea and feeling should vibrate in my audience is very exciting for me!’.

Within an American actor-training situation, this could be perceived as a lack of individuality. Within the Hindu notion of the small self as being a microcosm of the greater Self, her selflessness would be admired. Gandhi finds a way to deal with these disparities of her existence not by seeking integration, but rather by juxtaposing her many internalized selves. In her work *Bahu-Beti-Biwi* she transitions between traditionally ascribed roles as daughter-in-law/bride,<sup>33</sup> daughter and wife, while her reflexive self speaks back to herself in each of these roles. She plays with English and Gujarati words and sounds in the manner that kathak bol techniques manipulate syllables.<sup>34</sup> She shifts between stances, movements and dress habits of rural Gujarati homes and California girls. Gandhi uses classic abhinaya structures to alternate characters, but her reflexivity as a performer confirms what the audience clearly sees – that all her characters are herself, her own multiple subjectivities. She switches modes of address constantly. She speaks of

herself in the first person as 'I'. Next, assuming another unseen personality, she addresses herself in Gujarati as 'thu' (intimate form of 'you'). Then she might go on to describe one of her selves in the third person.

If we can accept the 'wholeness' of a performance of many selves, then can we accept disciplinary frames that intertwine, without being equated to one another nor descend into unqualified relativism? As demonstrated in the earlier examples of *Bahok* and *Zero Degrees* could we envision and accept a plurality of canons that enable a plurality of rhizomatic inter-informed theorizations of dance? To give independent and interdependent canonical status to several dance forms complicates dance studies, but this is a discipline that is perfectly positioned to be empowered by this move, because of the alterity of dance studies within academic discourse. Perhaps more arguments need to be made about the travels of motifs, on recyclings, recirclings and synchronicities of modernism/tradition.

Lest the observer become too disoriented with the shifting personas of her work, Gandhi consciously has left a trail of markers in her choreography, imaged dreams of freedom, domesticity, bondage, feeding and being fed. In choreographing dances it is crucial to establish different reference points so the audience can follow not only persona changes but also spatial and temporal trajectories. Without referential markers, choreography crumbles into inaccessible generalities.

Dance as representation<sup>35</sup> moves not merely beyond binaries and disciplinary boundaries, but through multiple moving identities. Postcolonial literature addresses multiple discursive locations. Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto LaClau have suggested that identity needs to be acknowledged not as fluid but as relative to its different locations in

trajectories of recognition and discourse, i.e. identity shapes choreography and is fixed by it as well.<sup>36</sup> As they continue to perform, individual histories of practice and of audiences inform the way that performers will continue to interrogate traditional interpretations, conventions and symbolic structures. Choreographies, technique systems, bodies and aesthetic norms all morph, albeit at different paces and amid uneven terrains of thought chains.<sup>37</sup> In Khan's *Zero Degrees* he and Cherkaoui simultaneously perform apparently spontaneous narratives, with stutters and pauses, which are in fact, perfectly synchronized. The 'natural' is exposed as artifice, as carefully memorized and planned! Here Khan visibilizes the techniques of narration of abhinaya (codified acting technique) and sanchari (i.e. variations). Here the sanchari are postmodern commentaries on the earlier conversations. Recognizable gestures transform into abstract activities. We watch meanings being drained as Khan decontextualizes gestures and then as he recontextualizes the gestures, we are drawn into deciphering their new roles. He uses one kind of choreographic convention to lead into and comment upon another. In kathak, rhythmic punctuation marks and gaps are indicated by the use of the head and hands. Temporal space is visualized as physical space by the shape, directionality and speed of the moving body. So also in some of Khan's *nrrta* passages (where movement is text) he progressively augments movements spatially<sup>38</sup> in much the same way as kathak dancers diminish the temporal shape of the rhythm patterns to build excitement. Bill T. Jones and others also present movement accumulations and diminutions, but Khan has a way of getting the postmodern into conversation with the shastric so that they highlight each other.

As we recognize the limits of our habitual thought patterns and thinking bodies, we recognize the boundaries of representation. Then the boundaries of our percepts can shift, and as they do, there is a need to respecify the perspectives from which we proceed. Each time that we re-present our histories of influences and choices, we rewrite identity.

### **To wrap up or cool down**

Most Asian nationals, performing in the 1980s were performing nationalism with its imperative to engage with modernity. They addressed dichotomies as tradition/innovation, national/individual, aliveness/fossilization, authenticity/the transcultural. Meanwhile avant-garde intercultural theories of Euro-American performance were making forays into otherness and learning hungrily from its performing techniques.

In the late 1990s, at APPEX, a sense of difference within pan-Asianness, accrued an aesthetic against a collective internalized whiteness. Otherness was nuanced by intra-Asian diversity. Pan-Asianness was refashioning itself for a market.

Now in 2010, we are seeing dances that incorporate old ways to map movement by using multiple movement vocabularies, so transforming both the technique and what it can speak. Dance not only offers a perfect metaphor for a complex kind of transience, but it's maps of movement and movement systems might suggest ways to consider multiple subjectivities contingent on transient locations and spatial (including social, gendered, psychological) formations being exemplified in works of Khan, Gandhi, Cynthia Ling Lee, Rajika Puri, Harikrishan and others.

If as Jukka Törrönen suggests, *all* dance performance can be considered the performance of identity, then I should address my writing not only to the internalized other, but also to the many other's who might just be present with me randomly in any space at any moment of the global flow of difference. Cultural shifts have their own independent and responsive momentums, demanding rewrites as we write. In her blogged review of the 2010 Erasing Borders Indian Dance Festival, Lavina Melwani writes: 'it's possible now to go global without even crossing borders, as cultures infiltrate the airspace and cyberspace'. The imperative for simultaneous multiplicity escalates.

With several levels of saturation in national and global performance cultures, the layering of gazes calls for recognizing more dimensions to performance. Mobilizing the bodies of my colleagues and my own,<sup>39</sup> in this personalized dialogue with discourses, I have staged crises of binaries, questioned the discursive value of a singular unified perspective, and shared the problem and necessities of dealing with a proliferation of gazes. I argued for the urgency of acknowledging identity as located along a multiplicity of points, that transform in time and space. In this sense identity is a dance, and all dance is the staging of identity. I plead that writings on dance disassociate from any singular foundational logic and engage with the ways that writing is itself an activity, and like movement systems and the performance of identity, writing is *always contingent* on the temporal, socio-economic, geocultural deep structures (see LaClau 1989; Foster 1995).

I also have to clarify that this has been a kind of diary of an ongoing personal dialogue with the discourse, and am grateful for the writings and practices that have signposted my own paths. This electronic record erases or stores my rewrites over time, but here that time is collapsed for the reader. How would you, the reader, understand the

eerie irony of becoming aware that I am making my final revisions to this manuscript in a tropical airport lounge waiting indefinitely for a delayed flight from a snowed-in place and the gentleman next to me has just handed his passport over to some official who has disappeared with it?

### **Acknowledgement**

For their provocative questions that fuelled my own, I would like to thank Marian Pastor-Roces (the violence inherent in curating exhibitions), Za'eva Cohen (the chasm between how I theorize and how I danced) and the dancers who collaborated with me in this dialogue. I need to thank Ranja for lighting the fire under my butt. I would like to thank Janet O'Shea and Geeti Sen for their comments on earlier versions, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak for pointing me towards the work of Mouffe and LaClau. I specially want to thank Ramsay Burt for pushing me to re-examine and clarify my agenda here. I especially want to thank my mother, for whom *all* the volumes of *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* are *still* fascinating because she finds herself culturally represented.

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Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts and earlier versions of these ideas on writing have appeared in

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'Writing out otherness: Dancing the Asian Indian' (2011) in *Traversing Traditions*

'Dancing and writing from otherness' (2006), *India International Centre Quarterly* 32/4

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‘Dancing Asianness at APPEX’, (2003) in *Narrative/Performance: Cross-Cultural Encounters at APPEX*

‘Speaking back: Dialogues in dance ethnography’ (2001).” *Dance Research Journal* 33/1

<sup>2</sup> The subaltern studies collective was founded by Ranajit Guha and including Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Partha Chatterjee in Calcutta, and addressed issues of authoritarian democracy, the peasant and self-representation during the mid-1970s while Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency in India (1975–1977).

<sup>3</sup> Most of the dancers of whom I speak in this article are not subalterns in the strict sense of that usage. However, the point of this article is to show that comparable structures of knowledge limit the Asian intercultural dancer (see Spivak 1988).

<sup>4</sup> This is not to valorize culturally significant groups as either ‘pure’ and uninflected by the pervasive influence of technologies or wholly resistant to dominant discourses (see Escobar 1992: 12).

<sup>5</sup> I need to acknowledge some very provocative and productive questions. At APPEX in 1999, as we were discussing Homi Bhabha’s notion of cultural transparency, Marian Pastor-Roces asked me, ‘What is it like, to have no other? [for you as a Parsee]’. Her question partnered another question, years earlier, from Za’eva Cohen (Director of the Dance Program at Princeton University), ‘How is it that in your performance you embrace what you criticize in your writings?’.

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<sup>6</sup> For further information see Sircar's preserved home page

<http://home.mchsi.com/~pravritti/> (Sircar 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Conversations and e-mail exchanges (2008–2009) with Steve Gorn. A long time friend and artistic associate of Sircar, flautist Gorn had known her parents and Ranja during the years they lived in New Paltz, NY. He spoke of how Ranja had come of age in the United States and then returned to Calcutta, and of how her work thrilled him 'precisely because she was able to tap both Indian and western discipline and choreographic freshness. I didn't sense that anything was been discarded or edited out on the basis of a conscious attempt to "define a style". Gorn is an acclaimed master in playing the *bansuri* or bamboo flute in both classical North Indian and New American music works. He has several albums and collaborative projects (see [www.stevegorn.com](http://www.stevegorn.com)).

<sup>8</sup> Parbati Sircar, Professor Emeritus at SUNY, New Paltz from 1966 to 1985 had taught in the Department of Geography before relocating to (then) Calcutta. Her mother, Manjushree Chaki-Sircar, a dancer-scholar had founded the very company in Calcutta that Ranja was to lead. Both parents had inspired and supported her dancing. I am grateful to Leela Venkataraman for her corrections pertaining to this chronology.

<sup>9</sup> 'At JU [Jadavpur University] in the mid 1980s, Ranja was a symbol of beauty, talent and brains' writes Ananya Mukherjee (2007).

<sup>10</sup> Personal communication at my home in Bombay (winter 1995–1996, date confirmed by Puri). I first met Sircar when she came to visit me in New York City in 1985–1986. Since then we communicated several times, at festivals, private meetings and by mail. Ramsay Burt confirms that Sircar was offered a position at De Montfort University, UK but she declined it.

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<sup>11</sup> The subtitle in *India Today* reads ‘Small-town sexual mores undergo a subtle shift as housewives and girls trade bodies for favours and fun’, implying that the suicides of the young women listed in this article are a consequence of failed (conservative and patriarchal) family values, and casting aspersions of Sircar’s private life. Apparently, the public association of ‘professional dancer’ with prostitution is still rampant!

<sup>12</sup> Vasudevan writes: ‘That this rupture itself was located within in the politics of caste, nationalism, gender, sexuality and religiosity was the specific locus of quiet but disabling anxiety for me, in three different languages...’ from his unpublished writing entitled *Dance Like Whatever* in 2008 (see also <http://aniruddhanvasudevan.blogspot.com/> accessed 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Richard Schechner’s enquiry into performative states and rasa theory with relationship to current anthropological and psychological studies is exceptional and has instigated considerable further scholarship in performance studies. Most other studies of rasa theory in the English language relegate it to domains of literary criticism, to historicity and pastness as in indological studies or within religious studies in terms of faith.

<sup>14</sup> Butler uses this telling phrase ‘sites for the hegemonic re-articulation of subject positions’ (1997) with reference to names and naming, but I argue here that aesthetic canons work effectively like names that accrue significance through repetition.

<sup>15</sup> Resistance by itself does not solve the problem of binaries. Bhabha suggests that you rewrite the narrative one re-inscription at a time, one author at a time, one strategy at a time. It would take many performances by many performers before the narrative changes, so the timing of the change in narrative would not work for the most innovative and early performers.

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<sup>16</sup> This is a reference to the notion of the separation of body and mind, and of the body as the servant of the mind.

<sup>17</sup> Lacan's unbridgeable gap between experience and image instigated feminist film

theorists to interrogate representations of performer-as-object, since the 1980s.

<sup>18</sup> Female infanticide, female foeticide and, more recently, sex-selective technologies of reproduction were frequent phenomenon in both rural and urban India.

<sup>19</sup> He speaks to the place of cultural perceptions in policies on funding the arts.

<sup>20</sup> See Pillai's argument of the way that the performance of Bharatanatyam outside Chennai impinges on performances at Chennai, a twentieth-century source site for this form.

<sup>21</sup> Arturo Escobar (1992) argues that issues of negotiating identity and meaning become crucial only *after* matters of survival (food and shelter versus the dominant power) have been resolved, but I argue that for artists they cannot be separated.

<sup>22</sup> This parallels Fanon's concern with the impact of colonialism on the imagination and cultural racialized self within the colonized communities.

<sup>23</sup> Exceptional to the above statement would be several articles in *Corporealities*, edited by Foster, that collectively address ways of 'propelling' movements towards theories that would honour the diverse positions of their 'speakers'.

<sup>24</sup> See Kariamuwelsh-Asante (1994) for her argument regarding Africanism.

<sup>25</sup> I am indebted to Deidre Sklar for asking this question and for encouraging me to participate in her round table on ethnography as an object of ethnographic study speaking back at the Dancing in the Millennium Conference, Washington, DC, July 2000. A summary of the presentation by four panelists, including myself, appeared in the dialogue section of *Dance Research Journal* (see Coorlawala 2001).

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<sup>26</sup> Bhabha (1994) suggests that it is a matter of destabilizing binaries so that the first term is not allowed to dominate the second.

<sup>27</sup> The arrangement of access on the Internet to texts, still and moving images and sound disrupts the authority of single word texts. The structures of the ways that we access our narratives have already enabled analysis – even on layman’s level – of the ways that thought can travel. Can word texts accommodate multiple simultaneous narratives?

<sup>28</sup> An example might be to assume that *chih* and *prana* function the same way in the ancient traditional Chinese and Indian body constructs, or assume they mean the same as breathing.

<sup>29</sup> See <http://www.wac.ucla.edu/cip/appexbook/dancingasianness.html> on structures of collaborative choreography, included in a comprehensive volume including ethnographic and performative perspectives of two years of this programme.

<sup>30</sup> Noting micro-processes are enabled by recent writings on dance and improvisation, which have taken on the transcription of multiple perceptual modes, formerly discrete perspectives and simultaneously accessed narratives.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of desire and representation, see Peggy Phelan (1993).

<sup>32</sup> The word ‘self’ confuses here, for the same word signifies differently across Eurocentric and Indian thinking. In current Anglo-American usage, ‘self’ is positioned as subject, central and as unmarked. In the Indian context, the same word often stands in for the ‘atma’, that transmigrates. This metaphysical self is transparent, unknowable, although ‘clothed’ in a physical human body. This self is the witness of the gaze, even when it is the object of the gaze. This self is its own other (*ananya means without an other*).

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<sup>33</sup> *Bahu* means bride or daughter-in-law. In traditional families the very young bride would typically move to her husband's family home. Her activities, dress, etc. will be supervised by her in-laws. I saw Gandhi's performances at National Asian American Theater Festival, New York City in October 2009; and excerpts at our Erasing Borders: Festival of Indian Dance in New York City, presented by the Indo-American Arts Council and Asia Society.

<sup>34</sup> Ling Lee shows this choreographic device in her own work, *Ruddha/Rude, huh?*.

<sup>35</sup> This would be choreography and the performance of it, according to Foster's 'Choreographics of gender', I have used the more generic word dance. In the Indian classical solo dance canon (say the kathak performances of Birju Maharaj), as the performer matures it becomes very difficult to distinguish between choreography and nuanced performance.

<sup>36</sup> Mark Franko writes 'the collusion of history and theory, rather, occurs where bodies, modernism and politics emerge in practice as dancing' (1996).

<sup>37</sup> By thought chain, I refer to hierarchy of disciplines and discourses that 'feed' off each other. In this hierarchy of discourses, dance studies seem to be reactive and responsive to a multiplicity of disciplines but can hardly be perceived as well situated.

<sup>38</sup> Khan's forehead hitting the floor repeatedly augments into a body rebounding off the floor like a bouncing ball.

<sup>39</sup> Mouffe and LaClau (2001) call for political theory to recognize discursively how the structures of passion and hope mobilize the social imaginary and enable conditions of possibility. Conversely, my dialogue is deeply etched with the traces (samskara) of three decades of watching/participating in the post-traditional dance scene of India.