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Photo: courtesy of Ananya Dance Theatre

Resistance Through Performance and Pedagogy: What is Dance Activism?

by Mariadela Belle Alvarez

Weight. Heaviness. Unbroken focus. Crisp precision. Bend further at the waist—find infinite length. Be generous with the hips. Percussive footwork. Control, softness, attack. Sweat. Fury.

It's June 2019, and I'm experiencing my body and technique in an empowering and transformative way at the Shawngram Institute for Performance and Social Justice in St. Paul, Minnesota. My first exposure to Yorchha, the signature technique developed over the past twenty years by Ananya Dance Theatre (ADT), was during the performance of *Shyamali* at the Painted Bride Art Center in May 2018, presented by Asian Arts Initiative. My spirit undeniably resonated with the bodies of the women on stage—black, brown, athletic, sinewy, full.

A bit of background for ADT's recent project:

> *Shyamali: Sprouting Words explores how dissent fuels life force and growth, recognizes the courage of women who speak up and talk back to sustain communities against injustice, and celebrates women who refuse to be broken. Inspired by the courage of women around the world, "Shyamali" means "dark green" in Bengali, and invokes the resilience of grass, which springs up when trod upon.*
>
> *-ananyadancetheatre.org*

After experiencing the pedagogy of Ananya Dance Theatre, I wanted to highlight the important bridges the company is making between the artistic process and social transformation, and the ways in which the experiences of women of color braid together the personal and

the political, carving space for the truth telling of ancestral forms.

Contemporary Indian dance has a history of appropriation and erasure in American modern dance history, notably by Euro-American artists Ruth St. Denis and Jack Cole in the development of modern and jazz techniques. In her book *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor,* Priya Srinivasan elaborates on archival evidence demonstrating that St. Denis had focused training with New York City's South Asian migrants in the late 19th century. Srinivasan's research shows that St. Denis trained with Indian dance communities in Coney Island, New York, and often cast Indian men in background ensemble pieces in her work. Cole studied Bhartanatyam, using "ethnic" dances to create theatrical jazz performance. Given this history of erasure, it is vital that contemporary Indian dance gets the credit it is due.

Dr. Ananya Chatterjea, founding artistic director of ADT, problematizes the notion of "contemporary dance" in a 2017 interview with tD writer Gregory King:

> *"I believe the term contemporary dance is actually wrapped up in whiteness. I do contemporary dance . . . contemporary Indian dance. But when people say they do contemporary and I say you mean white contemporary, they get offended." She continued, "White people want to claim everything, including the term contemporary."*

My modern dance training did not give me the means to understand my Latinidad. As a child of immigrants, I grew up learning how to "pass" in predominantly white spaces, including the ballet and modern spaces where I trained. Sometimes passing has less to do with the exact shade of your skin so much as how well you can perform assimilation. Passing is mostly about earning the acceptance of white culture.

Writer Michelle Alexander says that racism does not go away, it incrementally shifts and adapts to the times. The same is true for colonialism. The patterns of gentrification we see in U.S. urban arts districts have eerie parallels to how Latin America, in an attempt to whiten the continent, incentivized European immigration to the newly developed colonies built by African slaves. The centuries-old story of Latin America's transformation from Spanish colonies to nation states, maneuvered by the influence of the U.S. industrial boom and military projects, is embodied in the tension, ambiguities, and cultural resistance of *mestizaje.*

Brownness disrupts what is perceived as contemporary, as it is often exoticized to the extent of being excluded from its definition. The legacy and continued impact of colonialism would have us believe that traditions from the global south are a thing of the past, that globalization is synonymous with westernization. In fact, arts and culture of the global south are constantly evolving and have vital messages to share in the social movements of today. Women of color carrying diasporic traditions forward are reckoning with joys and burdens present in ancestral and intergenerational stories.

Women of color-led spaces like ADT's Shawngram Institute empower me to claim the histories of resistance in my ancestry and to embody this resiliency in my dancing. The integrity of remembering in ADT's performance and process makes it one of the most powerful contemporary touring companies in the current moment. Chatterjea's recently published "A manifesto for contemporary dance-making in a new decade" behooves artists to reflect critically on their role as culture makers. Not only is their theatrical work masterfully crafted with the sensibility and rigor of a committed scholar, but ADT is a thriving and important leader in the concert dance world, showing audiences and artists what integrity in dance-based activism looks like:

> a world where black, brown, feminine, queer bodies move with rigor and unity —
>
> honoring the land where the waters reflect the clouds
>
> *Mni sota makoce*

*Mitakuye oyasin**

all my relations —

reverence for our interconnectedness

embodiment of diaspora, ancestors, Spirit who are present in the process

a dance for the father and daughter drowned at the border

and the thousands of the children in neo-concentration camps.

a dance for starving peasants.

honoring and re-membering their struggle.

social transformation-infused pedagogy.*

Black queer feminist Charlene Carruthers writes in *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements*, “It is within the spaces of imagination, the dream spaces, that liberatory practices are born and grow, leading to the space to act and to transform.” Yorchha as a form demands clarity and rigor, and it is through this discipline that I deepen my understanding of social transformation. I now understand that the her-stories of resistance and fighting in social movements are not separate from the forms I study and create from. That resistance and transformation have to be imagined before they are actualized.

It’s connecting with this aspect of struggle through the pedagogy and performance of Ananya Dance Theatre that I understand the deeper force of resistance that lives in me and that it is not separate from my practice of contemporary technique. Artists are not government policy makers, but as Ananya says, “the responsibility of the artist is to chisel pathways to transformation.”

Today, as an LA based *artivista**, I organize with the Dancing Diaspora Collective founded by Marina Magalhães. Through our workshops, classes, performance activation events, and festivals, we holds dialogue around decolonization in practice, creating social, racial, and economic practices of equity rooted in the movements of the Latin and African diasporas.* I study with CONTRA-TIEMPO, a touring company founded and directed by Ana Maria Alvarez, whose concert works amplify current social movements in collaboration with LA-based artists and grassroots organizers. As a Teaching Artist, I offer Afro Latin movement curriculum not only to Latinx students who identify themselves in the work, but to all citizens who are present, complicit in, and vulnerable to the systems of nation-state borders upholding US imperialism and perpetuating climate and refugee crises globally. These stories are not separate from the practices. In 2017, I developed an evening-length project through the Painted Bride Art Center, based on the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, which explored connections between diaspora and resistance. Through my training and research in forms that have withstood colonization while building resilient, thriving communities, I am inspired to reimagine artistic production bridging ancestral wisdom and direct action.

I believe dance is futuristic technology for resistance, organizing, and healing toward collective liberation. Dance gives us tools to agitate the status quo with assembled bodies in space, surrender to cycles grounded in ancestral traditions, and co-create with *Madre Tierra* while listening closely to her rhythms and health. She holds infinite possibilities for regeneration.

Simply put by an activist quoted in the LA Times, “You just need a body and a voice.”

* http://bdotememorymap.org/mnisota/

*artivista: artist-activist

*Paraphrased from Chatterjea's teaching, Shawngram Intensive 2019

*Dancing Diaspora Collective Mission & Core Values, 2020

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