

Essay

In Search of Context, In Search of Home

Sujata Goel

Independent Researcher, Harrisburg, PA 17102, USA; sgsujata@gmail.com

Abstract: In this text, the author outlines her personal narrative as a dancer and choreographer over twenty years. She traces her path of migration between the USA, India and Europe in search of artistic context and belonging. Her account addresses larger issues such as Orientalism and Eurocentrism in the global, contemporary dance sphere.

Keywords: migration; context; orientalism; contemporary dance; South Asian diaspora

I never had the opportunity to document my story as a dancer and have wondered what it adds to a larger context of contemporary dance. However, as I collaborate more with North American South Asian diasporic contemporary dancers and choreographers, it is important to supplement academic, scholarly or theoretical perceptions and knowledge-bases by articulating our lived experiences as professional artists navigating a critical and contemporary approach to making dance in this context. As an Indian-American dancer who migrated between the USA, India and Europe for nearly twenty years, in search of artistic context, in search of home, I communicate my individual narrative through an essayistic, intimate, diaristic writing approach supplemented with personal archival photos (Figures 1–25) to communicate larger political, economic and cultural issues that continue to demand attention and change in the global, contemporary dance sphere.

1. USA to India: 1979–1996

In the mid-1960s, my father migrated to the USA from rural Punjab, a state in north India. The first to be college-educated from his family, it was considered miraculous that he received the chance to complete his PhD in engineering abroad.



Citation: Goel, Sujata. 2023. In Search of Context, In Search of Home. *Arts* 12: 194. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts12050194>

Academic Editor: Lionel Popkin

Received: 26 April 2023

Revised: 17 August 2023

Accepted: 23 August 2023

Published: 7 September 2023



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Figure 1. “Wedding”, 1972 (author’s photograph archive).

In 1972, arranged by family, he married my mother. Everyone told her how lucky she was to marry a man settled in the West, the great land of economic opportunity, freedom

and happiness. Born in Ohio, I am a first-generation Indian immigrant and was raised in Harrisburg, PA, USA.



Figure 2. “Harrisburg Home, USA, 1989” (author’s photograph archive).



Figure 3. “Mom with Us”, 1983 (author front left) (author’s photograph archive).

Growing up, my family was deeply integrated in the Indian community.



Figure 4. “Harrisburg Indian Community Pooja (religious function), 1980s” (author’s photograph archive).

“H.A.R.I.”, the local Hindu temple, was the hub of the community’s activities. We went to “Indian Sunday School’ where community parents conducted different language, culture and religion classes so their children maintained a connection to India. At age four, this is where I started learning Bharatanatyam.



Figure 5. “H.A.R.I. Temple in Harrisburg” (author’s photograph archive).



Figure 6. “Bharatanatyam Class 1” (author short, center) (author’s photograph archive).



Figure 7. “Bharatanatyam Class 2” (author front spectacles) (author’s photograph archive).

Dance was a therapeutic escape from the stress and pressure of a predominantly White school and an unstable homelife. As a child, Bharatanatyam's structured narratives and rhythm, codified movement and inherent repetition grounded me. I also grew up on a "healthy dose" of Bollywood dance and cinema, the big "icon" of Indian culture for the South Asian diaspora.

Between my Bharatanatyam and Bollywood dance skills, I became the town "child-performer", entertaining the local NRI and White communities in restaurants, cultural shows and weddings.



Figure 8. "Indian Culture in Harrisburg Area Church, 1985" (author photograph archive).

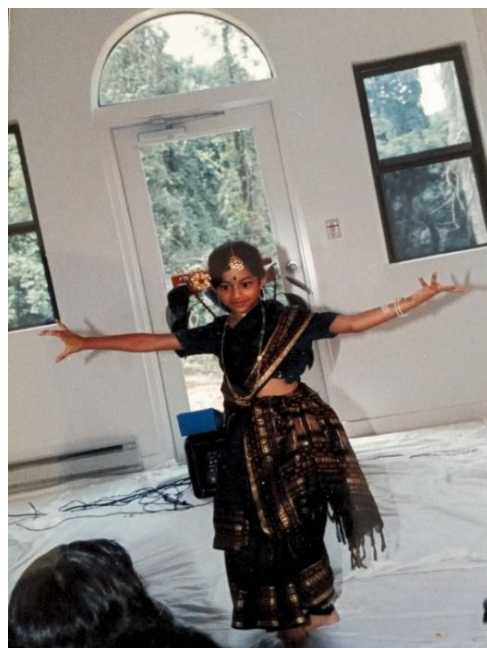


Figure 9. "Holi Festival Performance, 1987" (author photograph archive).

Summers oscillated between rural Punjab with family and Yogaville, Virginia at the "Natya Adhyayana Bharatanatyam Gurukula" camp conducted by renowned Bharatanatyam

gurus V.P. and Shanta Dhananjayan from Chennai, India, the most prominent city for traditional South Indian dance and music. Yogaville was founded in 1980 by spiritual guru Sri Swami Satchidananda who spearheaded “integral yoga” in the 1960s and remains the headquarters for the Satchidananda Ashram where the guru’s yoga techniques and spiritual philosophies are taught and promoted ([Satchidananda Ashram Yogaville 2023](#)). In 1998, with the intention of spreading Indian culture and offering “authentic” Bharatanatyam training to the diaspora, the camps emulated the curriculum and structure of “Bharata Kalanjali”, the Dhananjayans’ Bharatanatyam school in Chennai, India ([Bharata Kalanjali 2022](#)). Located in a forest deep in the woods, the camps were idyllic and provided a phantasmatic representation of what living in India as a Bharatanatyam dancer could be like. Immersed in art and the body, I imagined myself “authentically” pursuing Bharatanatyam as a “career” and lifestyle in the tropical landscape of South India. My gurus were like my parents but “functional” in my mind; they taught me structure and discipline and I felt safe with them. Being a professional dancer in India itself seemed like the only “honest” way to embody my passion at that point.



Figure 10. “Yogaville Lotus Temple at Camp”. Photo credit: [bharatakalanjali.in](#) (accessed on 8 August 2023).

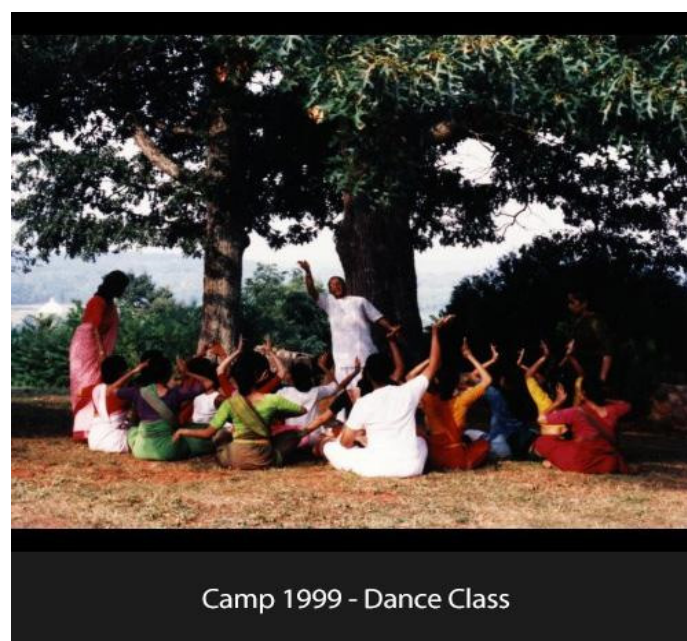


Figure 11. Photo credit: [bharatakalanjali.in](#) (accessed on 8 August 2023) (image not from author’s year at camp but same class as previous years when author attended).

So profound was the camp's effect on me that I chose to forgo an academic, Western, institutional college education and moved to Chennai to study Bharatanatyam at Bharata Kalanjali. My parents were displeased, but sending me away was justifiable as it alleviated the financial burden of putting three children through college in the USA. In the summer of 1996, I left the American suburbs and headed for South India.

2. India: 1996–2004

"Bharata Kalanjali" was similar to camp except instead of the Virginia woods, I was in the sprawling metropolis of Chennai.



Figure 12. "Bharata Kalanjali Exterior View". Photo credit: bharatakalanjali.in (accessed on 8 August 2023).

Days consisted of classes in Bharatanatyam, repertoire, Carnatic (South Indian classical) vocal music, nattuvangam (syllabic rhythm system) and introductory Sanskrit. Emulating a pseudo-gurukula model, dance, personhood, social roles and daily routine formed a holistic, ritualistic and grounding pedagogy. Knowledge was cyclically acquired as opposed to a modern, Western, institutional paradigm where content and curriculum are stratified in fixed time frames.



Figure 13. "Daily Bharatanatyam Class, BK". Photo credit: bharatakalanjali.in (accessed on 8 August 2023).



Figure 14. “Performance at Bharata Kalanjali, 1997” (author first row, third from left) (author’s photograph archive).

I was largely confined to the dance school and its activities like attending local performances and occasional social outings with other students. Overall, I could not independently venture too far; I was told to beware of men and remain focused on my studies. Regardless, I embraced my new life and immersed myself in the environment. Studying dance in a lush, “island-like”, sweltering landscape lined with palm trees and coconuts seemed exponentially better than taking preliminary college classes in lecture halls in rural America surrounded by strip malls. Initially, I repressed the “Western” side of me and assimilated, trying to be as “Indian” as possible. I spoke only Hindi or the little Tamil I knew, and when I was not in the mandatory Bharatanatyam “uniform”, (the conventional dance sari, bindi, earrings, bangles and kohl around our eyes), I wore traditional Punjabi attire or full saris.



Figure 15. “Afternoon Photo Outside of School, 1996” (author’s photograph archive).

Eventually, however, I could not silence such a huge part of me. Going from a Western, American context where I had certain liberties to explore teenage-hood to a more orthodox, conservative, authoritative environment was not an easy transition. Rebelling with the little freedom I had as I got to know the city more, I found ways to create “parallel lives”, sneaking cigarettes and even starting a secret relationship with a local north Indian man.



Figure 16. ‘Arangetram’, 1997 (author’s photograph archive).

After completing my “arangetram” (a public debut performance) and briefly performing in the local Bharatanatyam circuit with the “Bharata Kalanjali” dance troupe, my parallel life was discovered. I was kicked out and sent back to the USA.

Unable to re-integrate, I eventually returned to Chennai after being accepted into “Kalakshetra: Rukmini Devi College of Fine Arts”, a leading, international Bharatanatyam dance school.



Figure 17. “Kalakshetra Entrance: Statue of RDA” (author’s photograph archive).



Figure 18. “Kalakshetra Daily Dance Class, 1999” (author second from back, photo center) photo credit: Chandra Bathwal.

Over the course of three years alongside my dance studies, I began researching the institution and form realizing that Bharatanatyam was not an “ancient, classical dance form” but in fact, in the mid-20th century, Kalakshetra spearheaded the “re-invention” of “sadir”, the indigenous dance tradition of the hereditary devadasi community, creating a modern form called “Bharatanatyam”. Much of my discovery of modern Bharatanatyam’s history occurred through experience and personal dialogue with other artists and scholars living and working in Chennai at the time who were researching Bharatanatyam and its history, but it is important to mention this topic has been and continues to be researched and is a widely debated subject in the field of Indian dance studies in both India and the North American diaspora. I discovered the work of Matthew Harp Allen and his critique of Kalakshetra and Rukmini Devi Arundale through his article “Rewriting the Script for South Asian Dance” (Allen 1997). Though his arguments and position on the subject are contested by other academics and scholars, at the time, the basic ideas he presented that present-day Bharatanatyam originated from the hereditary devadasi community’s dance traditions and that its history was intertwined with the nationalist, upper-caste agendas during independence were eye-opening for me (Harp, Matthew H.). Unpacking Bharatanatyam’s history and realizing the growing gap between my personal identity and the form, I became increasingly disillusioned with the institution.

Living off campus allowed me to develop another world for myself outside of Kalakshetra. I met other international dancers, academics and artists. Maarten Visser, a saxophonist and composer, introduced me to the modern and contemporary dance community in Chennai. He was working extensively with the contemporary dancer and choreographer, Padmini Chettur, whom I eventually worked with for many years. But my first encounter was with Chandralekha.



Figure 19. “Chandralekha”. Photo credit: Sadanand Menon.

Chandralekha (1928–2006) was one of the early pioneers of Indian modern dance. She was an upcoming Bharatanatyam dancer in the mid-20th century, but a growing disconnect between her politics, artistic identity and the form of Bharatanatyam led her to finally abandon it. She then spent approximately twenty years researching and traveling through rural and urban India and became involved in various contemporary, avant-garde art and political arenas such as the feminist, activist, textile-crafts, design, writing and cinema movements (Bharucha 1995). Eventually, in the early 1980s, she returned to dance and developed her form and ideology of the body rooted in Indian movement aesthetics and post-colonial thought (Bharucha 1995).

In my last year at Kalakshetra, I approached Chandralekha about working with her. We spent a couple of afternoons having conversations on art, beauty and dance, and I performed a brief Bharatanatyam and Kalaripayettuh (South Indian martial art) demonstration while she sat in a swing and watched, and this was my informal “audition”. Because students were not permitted to work outside Kalakshetra, she invited me to join her company after graduation.

Soon after my encounter with Chandralekha, I met Padmini Chettur and forwent Chandralekha’s invitation.



Figure 20. “Padmini Chettur”. Photo credit: G. Venkat Ram.

Originally trained in Bharatanatyam, Padmini was a lead dancer in Chandralekha's troupe from 1990–2001, but when I met her in 2000, she had predominantly left Chandralekha and was making her own work. I joined as a dancer for her quartet "Fragility". Padmini's work had moved away from a pre-occupation of representing and referencing the past through form or using "traditional Indian" movement language to symbolize her conceptual research (Colah 2016; Ramamurthy 2012). Unpacking a new politics of exotica, one that Indian modern and contemporary dance had not yet undertaken, Padmini consciously rejected markers of "Indian" identity and formal virtuosity, embracing a stark and stripped vocabulary (Colah 2016; Ramamurthy 2012). Contrary to the predictable debates that ensued on whether her work was "Indian" or "Western", she employed minimalism in her work to bring focus back to the body and personal identity of the dancer and away from the distracting ornamentation historically associated with Indian dancers' presence. It was an aesthetic investigation to make unadorned, un-exotic bodies real, fragile, human and visible again.

During my time working with Padmini, she and her colleague Krishna Devanandan, also an ex-Chandralekha dancer, were experimenting with new dance pedagogies that supported the training process for dancers entering Padmini's work. At that time, Padmini worked with little support or funding, and though we were grateful for the daily rehearsal space granted to us at the "Alliance Francaise, Chennai", in that context, making non-classical or non-commercial dance was next to impossible. Our collective commitment was not economically based but based on an artistic urgency to create new contexts, pedagogies and forms. Using the little resources and educational material available at that time in Pilates, yoga, physiotherapy, and specific vocabularies of Western contemporary dance, we trained with various modules Padmini and Krishna rigorously constructed.

Initially, I continued training in and performing Bharatanatyam. I also began experimenting choreographically with the form of Bharatanatyam. My first work, "Alaripu 5" was a re-interpretation of the traditional Bharatanatyam repertoire item, "Alaripu" in "Khanda chapu" (five-beat cycle), adding folk percussion in the orchestra and experimenting with "Trikala" or the three-speed system of movement in Bharatanatyam. Eventually, however, I had to choose between Bharatanatyam and contemporary dance as my body was becoming confused by training in different techniques. On a political level, it also became increasingly strange to oscillate between the Bharatanatyam context with abundant resources, funding and status and simultaneously participating in the "underground contemporary dance scene" in Chennai.

In 2001, "Fragility" premiered in Berlin, and Padmini's work began to receive support from the European dance network. On tours, my curiosity about Western contemporary dance, choreography and pedagogies rose. In India, I had little exposure to other work, and the one contemporary dance school in India at that time focused on fusion and technology in dance which did not interest me pedagogically. Naïve at the time, the "well-structured", "packaged" Western, institutional dance school model seemed ideal. I stayed in Chennai until 2004, yet while on tour, I started applying to dance schools in Europe including Folkwang, SNDO, Rotterdam Dance Academy and Salzburg Experimental School of Dance. In 2003, while I was performing in Utrecht, a friend of mine studying at P.A.R.T.S. in Brussels, Belgium, encouraged me to apply. Initially placed on the waiting list, I was then accepted as the first "Indian" student at the school. It was an extremely hard decision, but I left Chennai in 2004, ready for a new experience and to start making my own work. At the time, Padmini emphasized that the solution to my current "problem" as a dancer could not necessarily be solved by going to Europe. Though I realized what she meant only years later, in 2004, after nearly a decade of living in Chennai, I moved to Brussels.

3. Europe: 2004–2008

P.A.R.T.S. prided itself on being a "progressive, international and experimental" dance school, though I quickly realized their slogan was contradictory. It celebrated diversity, innovation and multiple modernities, but the curriculum was essentially Eurocentric.

Based on the American and European canon of post-modern dance, it combined ballet, specific iterations of “Release technique”, post-modern improvisation and dance repertoire, Western theatre and music sprinkled with classes in Eastern body practices such as Iyengar yoga, macrobiotics, Shiatsu and periodic “ethnic” dance workshops.

Placed in the first “training” cycle, I was overwhelmed. In India, I was considered an advanced dancer technically and intellectually; at P.A.R.T.S., I was told to “catch up”. My entry also coincided with Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker’s Indophilic phase, and I was regularly summoned for content and advice on her work “Raga for the Rainy Season”. My “consultancy” was hardly compensated, and clearly my training and background meant nothing unless it could be appropriated and colonized.

Keeping up with the technique classes was a struggle. I was not used to jumping, pointing my toes, rolling on the ground and speeding through “virtuosic” movement phrases. In this context, virtuosity meant something very different than in my experience. Antithetical to my training in Bharatanatyam and contemporary dance, in this context, virtuosity was characterized by speed, defying gravity through movement and taking up as much external space as possible with the body. Though I tried as hard as possible, my body ached and I found myself uninterested in these techniques. I tried shifting to the second research cycle, where I hoped to focus more on developing my own work and process as a choreographer, but was told I would not be able to keep up because of the repertory requirements. My choice was to leave or stay and figure out how to play the game. I chose the latter.

“Catching up” meant many extra studio hours practicing class material and making my own work. In my first year, I made “Lady”, a short solo on walking, and a duet, “Disco Dancer”, based on dance sequences from the Indian film “Disco Dancer” (1982). Both pieces were received well and utilized by P.A.R.T.S. I became a new, marketable “trend”. For example, as a first-cycle student, my work was included in the 2006 P.A.R.T.S. market tour for second-cycle students. Regardless of these small “wins”, after I completed the training cycle, I left P.A.R.T.S. I was exhausted, and it was clear my technical “lack” and resistant attitude had no place there.

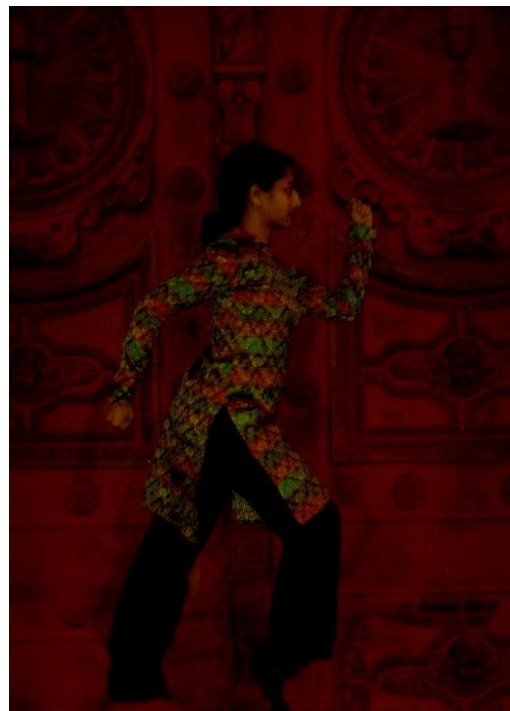


Figure 21. “Lady”. Photo credit: Shelbatra Jashari.



Figure 22. “Disco Dancer”. Photo credit: Shelbatra Jashari.

I entered the European market, signing a two-year contract with W.P. Zimmer in Antwerp to develop “Disco Dancer” into an evening-length work. However, the pressure of having to deliver another “hit” ultimately sabotaged the process of “Nightlife”, the new work.

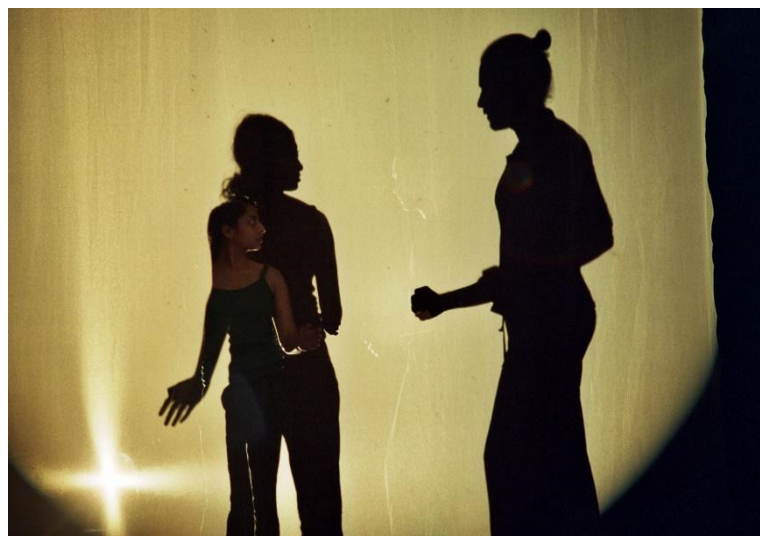


Figure 23. “Nightlife”. Photo credit: Philippe Clercq.

After its premier, W.P. Zimmer was disappointed with the work and terminated my contract. I was humiliated, confused, angry and lost. I had no luck finding support from other production houses and decided to return to India. Perhaps I should have kept fighting, but at that moment, though I did not know where it was anymore, I wanted to go home.

4. Return to India: 2008–2012

I took a job teaching and doing administrative work at the Indian contemporary dance school, “Attakkalari Centre for Movement Arts”, in Bangalore but resigned after a year. In 2009, Padmini was making a new work and offered for me to rejoin her company. Since that was the last context where I felt safe, I returned to Chennai.

Dancing again in a familiar form was healing, yet I wanted to make my own work. Fractured and disrupted by constant geographical shifts, I wanted to see my choreographic process through. With the support of an India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) grant and residency at “Adishakti: Laboratory for Theatre Arts Research” (Pondicherry, India), I made a solo, “Dancing Girl”. A two-year process of unpacking the forms and politics in my body, my experience in Europe and the fragmentation and trauma of my “self” resulted in a singular, formal response to the perversion of Orientalism. Dressed as an “Indian doll”, as a symbol of the stereotypical image of the female, Indian dancer, the work dismantled this image through a durational, anti-entertainment and highly formal approach to arrive at an aesthetic of invisibility within visibility, loneliness and resistance.

I performed the piece in Pondicherry and Chennai and then I ran out of money. I could not financially support myself as a freelance dancer and a single, Indian-American woman in India so I went home. Again.

5. Return to USA: 2012-Present

My USA return coincided with the “Dancing Girl” tour. “Dancing Girl” was picked up by Tang Fu Kuen, a prominent curator and producer of Asian contemporary performance; he commended its subversive nature and produced and marketed it in the global, contemporary dance festival circuits. From 2012 to 2016, I internationally toured “Dancing Girl” having my brief moment of “success”. Ultimately, however, the work was usurped into the market and misread. I welcomed the “gigs”, but it was not represented as a strong critique of Orientalism, so its role in the market remained ambiguous. Was it the tokenistic Asian work, contemporary Indian dance “going back to its roots” or new “fusion”? As opposed to starting a real, serious conversation around Orientalism, the greater concern was how soon I could make a sellable next work, reinforcing the consumerist, “use and throw” approach to Asia (Ong Keng Sen as referenced by [Padmini 2023](#)). If the next work did not have a “pretty Indian costume” as I consciously utilized in “Dancing Girl”, was there still interest? ([Padmini 2023](#)).



Figure 24. “Dancing Girl”. Photo credit: Rithvik Raja.

After “Dancing Girl”, making a new work was essential to “keep up” with the market pace, but I was not ready to. Moving back to the USA was a difficult cultural and social transition, and finding work took time. Because it was significantly more affordable, I chose to live in Harrisburg, PA, but this also hindered my connection to relevant, urban

dance contexts, and it was hard to make work regularly. Nonetheless, in 2019 at the “American Realness” festival in NYC, I premiered a new solo, “Self Love”, based on my experience as an Indian yoga teacher working in the American wellness industry. The piece needed development and work, but the pressure and isolation during the creation process deteriorated my mental and physical health. So, I decided to stop dancing.



Figure 25. “Self Love”. Photo credit: Roger Casas.

In 2020, I joined a collective of South Asian diasporic dancers and choreographers, and in 2022, I re-approached my practice. As I re-entered the North American South Asian diasporic dance context, I contended with some fundamental questions for myself: What exactly does it mean to belong to the South Asian diasporic dance community in this moment? Can my experience in India and Europe contribute to the current diasporic discourse or is it irrelevant? What is the diasporic dance community’s relationship to India and is a deeper understanding of Indian modern and contemporary dance history necessary or is the diasporic context seen as completely separate from India’s?

Though clearly the diaspora grapples with its own unique issues very different than India’s, both milieus seem to engage in practices with a history rooted in India which somehow cannot be ignored. In this sense, I wonder how a more extensive and complex understanding of Indian modern and contemporary dance history contributes to politicizing the current and future generations of diaspora artists.

Specifically, I am interested in developing conversations on how the diasporic dance community can further articulate a position on “form” when it is “displaced”. The migration of the “forms”, such as Bharatanatyam, seems like the beginning of a larger politic because as a community we must carefully examine what happens to a form when it is removed from its context. Does a form only belong to a history, a place or a people? If not, then how can we more specifically articulate a transformative process of “form” as it becomes a knowledge system that can be accessed and used regardless of identity politics or a need to understand its historical and political foundations? In this mode of questioning, many other important questions such as the following also seem to arise: How does the notion of “the Other” actually begin and how do we in the diaspora view fusion and the “importation” of dance languages? Are these questions a starting point to then examine issues of class on a global level, particularly with regard to how funding, resources, entitlement and space are allotted?

These questions finally led me to realize that as I navigate making work in this context today, I am forced to contend with the paradox of my own social identity in the USA. Though I can remotely relate to being racialized and marginalized the way other minority communities are in the USA, I am also a product of an upper-class, educated South Asian diasporic community that has access to the resources of the ascendant group. From this vantage point, I am keen to initiate newer, self-reflexive dialogues examining how the diasporic community operates within the dominant class as opposed to outside of it. Further, can we look to India not only as a site of “traditions” and caste politics, but also as

an arena where critical, contemporary discourse centralizes an intersection between class, artmaking and commerce as opposed to using an American race-relations framework as a starting point?

Finally, I am not sure if I have one, sole artistic context that I identify with, and my life remains nomadic. I also now choose to separate my artistic practice from my livelihood. Detaching from the global dance market structure as a means of survival means my process is slower and remains isolated, but it is worth the freedom I have to make the kind of work I want, when I want, and choose which contexts, forms of support and conversations are relevant to my process. Ultimately, I hope my work can be part of a future generation of North American South Asian diasporic contemporary dance that expands its ability to read and critically think about work emerging from both India and the diaspora and where the diasporic voice can widen its potential within the global, contemporary dance sphere.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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