Choreographing Coalition in Cyber-Space: Post *Natyam's* Politico-Aesthetic Negotiations

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Introduction

This practice-based essay unpacks the collaborative process of the Post *Natyam* Collective, a transnational, internet-based group of women artists working on critical approaches to South Asian dance. The essay aims to reveal the sticky politico-aesthetic negotiations of choreographing coalition and to discuss how the internet, used "as a grass-roots medium" (Wulff 2004: 190), initiates a re-visioning of collaborative, (feminist)[2] choreographic processes. As Polly Carl and Vijay Mathew, directors of the American Voices New Play Institute, state, "the 'we' potential in Internet technologies" allows "build[ing] our knowledge commons" through "idiosyncratic, alternative, or 'off-label' uses that serve the particular needs of our community" (Carl and Mathew 2011).

The Post *Natyam* Collective is firmly committed to collaboration. Structured as a horizontal network, rather than a vertical hierarchy with an artistic director, the collective honors multiple perspectives, geographic locations, cultural contexts and movement forms, while refusing a signature dance-vocabulary "brand." Collective members Sandra Chatterjee, Cynthia Ling Lee, Shyamala Moorty, and Anjali Tata, located between Los Angeles, Kansas City, Munich, and India, stay in regular artistic and political dialogue utilizing free internet technologies.

Committing to collaboration requires making room for each other's perspectives and stepping outside individual comfort zones to support each other's art-based political action. Such grassroots art making, to borrow contemporary art theorist Grant Kester's words, requires "the artist to surrender the security of self-expression for the risk of inter-subjective engagement" (2004: 8). As collective members, we have different political stances that map onto distinct aesthetic preferences. Our stances range from community-based art activism to deconstructing dance histories, questioning classical dance's gender constructs, challenging the audience's sexualiz-

1 The article has been co-written by Chatterjee and Lee. Authorship is equal.

2 Not every collective member self-identifies as activist or feminist. But we all engage with activist and feminist approaches (see also Mohanty 2003: 50).

ing/exotifying gaze, and connecting the political and the spiritual. These stances overlap, yet they can also contradict each other, producing conflict. Similarly, our differing politics manifest themselves through different aesthetics: while some of us favor creating images of healing and empowerment, others insist on highlighting multiple contradictory meanings and tensions; simultaneously others engage in the deconstruction of culturally diverse movement forms.

Working through our politico-aesthetic conflicts towards a progressive South Asian choreographic coalition brings deep feminist disagreements to the surface. In a critical discussion of women and "women of color" as a social category, feminist theorist of color Chandra Talpade Mohanty states that "there is no logical and necessary connection between being female and becoming feminist" (2003: 49). She critiques the term "feminism" from the perspective of women of color:

> Feminist movements have been challenged on the grounds of cultural imperialism and of shortsightedness in defining the meaning of gender in terms of middle-class, white experiences, internal racism, classism, and homophobia. All of these factors, as well as the falsely homogenous representation of the movement by the media, have led to a very real suspicion of "feminism" as a productive ground for struggle. (49–50)

Drawing on Mohanty's framework, then, a coalition of women of color would be effective as a "viable oppositional alliance [based on] a common context of struggle rather than color or racial identifications" (2003: 49). Critiquing unity as "a potentially repressive fiction," Mohanty and Biddy Martin (2003: 99) write:

> It is at the moment at which groups and individuals are conceived as agents, as social actors, as desiring subjects that unity, in the sense of coherent group identity, commonality, and shared experience, becomes difficult. Individuals do not fit neatly into unidimensional, self-identical categories (ibid).

Similarly, gender theorist Judith Butler states: "No one stands within a definition of feminism that remains uncontested." (2004: 174) She continues:

> I approach feminism with the presumption that no undisputed premises are to be agreed upon in the global context. And so, for practical and political reasons, there is no value to be derived in silencing disputes. The questions are: how best to have them, how most productively to stage them, and how to act in ways that acknowledge the irreversible complexity of who we are? (Butler 2004: 176)

Consistent with our internet-based process, the "disputes" of the collective are largely "staged" on a blog, where the individual members' local processes intersect.[3] The blog illustrates what Grant Kester, following Bakhtin, describes as "dialogical art practice" (2004: 10), which replaces the art object with "a cumulative process of exchange and dialogue" (2004: 12). In this sense, the collective's sustained online "conversations" bring together "a locus of differing meanings, interpretations, and points of view" (Kes-

3 See www.postnatyam.blogspot.com

ter 2004: 10) aiming to "imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities, official discourse, and the perceived inevitability of partisan political conflict" (Kester 2004: 8).

The artistic works discussed here reflect the politics of process (grassroots internet choreography) and the process of choreographing coalition. How does our internet-based choreographic coalition enact dialogue among difference? How should we re-envision choreography in light of our border-crossing, hyperlinked attempts at a democratic, many-headed voicing of feminist, postcolonial, contemporary South Asian dance? What are the most promising practical strategies for negotiating the tension between our political stances, between the individual and the group, and between the local and the long-distance?

Shifting Sites: The Politics of Process

Since late 2008, the collective has largely transitioned from studio-based to internet-based collaboration – not because of an aesthetic interest in cutting-edge technology and globalized intercultural networks, but out of a lack of resources. We utilize free and inexpensive internet tools such as blogging, video posting, conference calls, and online documents to stay connected across the distance despite a lack of funding, the high costs of travel and visas, and time constraints due to responsibilities of motherhood and earning a living. The internet, in dance anthropologist Helena Wulff's terms, functions here "as a grass-roots medium connecting people of lesser means and political agendas on a global level" (2004: 190). This runs contrary to seemingly related dance-media work like dance telematics, where networked performers in different locales simultaneously perform together. While such work is usually sited in well-funded institutions with high internet bandwidth, our work aesthetically reflects a DIY sensibility: our technology seldom looks slick and can be rough around the edges.

Our shift to internet-based collaboration grew out of a process of generating material for a live performance project, *SUNOH! Tell Me, Sister*.[4] Collective members rotated to give monthly assignments,[5] posting video responses and providing feedback to each other through blog comments. As such our online creative process encourages multiple voices, creates a structure of supportive feedback, and puts democratic dialogue about our sometimes conflicting (feminist) approaches, political methods, and aes-

4 Our online creative process was initially devised to generate movement material for *SUNOH! Tell me, Sister*, a joint performance inspired by the artistic legacy of Indian courtesans, to be compiled during two short residencies and premiered as a live performance. The performance's thematic focus widened and did not materialize with the four collective members as planned. The show, containing long-distance contributions from all members, has been mostly performed by Cynthia and Shyamala, with one run with Anjali as a trio.

5 Our process has shifted to accommodate a wider range of choreographic and research methodologies, as themes, ideas, and threads emerged that required longer development.

Picture 1: "Cyber Chat"

Clockwise from upper left: Anjali Tata, Cynthia Ling Lee, Shyamala Moorty, Sandra Chatterjee

thetic manifestations into the public sphere, opening up our process to outside intervention.[6] This shift of making our online collaborative process transparent to the public undoes the hermeticism of choreographic process, where creation usually takes place in private with only polished products made public through performance. As such, it democratizes and demystifies artistic practice, in line with the feminist visual/conceptual art practice of approaching documentation of process as an artistic end in itself (McDowell 2009).

The gradual shift to an internet-based process has had profound, unforeseen effects on the collective's overall work:

(1) Change of choreographic process: transforming each other's material into multiple, independent, and local manifestations instead of working towards one common, stable, and finished product.

(2) Mediatization of artistic product: online cultural production (video, text, sound design, art-books) supplants live dance; and change of presentation format: online sharing and art installations as alternatives to theatrical performance.

6 While it is rare for total outsiders to give feedback (and we do moderate comments by outsiders), in our recent project, local collaborators outside of the four-person collective regularly consulted the blog and made comments.

(3) Change of relationship to audience: (a) making a blog-based creative process transparent to the public (b) cultivating participatory structures that invite local audiences and artists to contribute to live artistic productions.[7]

Situated in a liminal space between online and live performance, our dance-work edges towards what dance scholar Harmony Bench calls "social dance-media," a hybrid form of screen-dance and social media, i. e. "the subset of Web 2.0 technologies through which internet users share and comment upon others' posted content" (2010b). Typified by an "agenda of accessibility," social dance media refers to "choreographies that elaborate upon social media's ideologies of participation. . . . dance should be shared, copied, embodied, manipulated, and recirculated rather than preserved for the professional and elite dancer . . . to create new grounds upon which to establish movement communities" (ibid). Between 2009 and 2011, we developed an "open source" policy within the collective, encouraging each other to "borrow, steal, appropriate, translate" and "creatively recycle" (Chatterjee, Lee, Moorty, and Tata 2011) each other's ideas to build our "movement community". While we have not yet centralized public participation in our process, social dance-media's emphasis on participation, sharing, and circulation facilitates a crucial transnational exchange about feminist, choreographic and activist approaches within the collective.

An artistic by-product of our shift to internet-based collaboration is an ongoing series of dance-for-camera pieces, the *Cyber Chats.* Created in collaboration with filmmakers Sangita Shresthova and Prumsodun Ok, these dance-for-camera pieces evolved unexpectedly out of our creative assignments and make extensive use of sampling and remixing. They illustrate a politics of process, negotiating between individual and collective authorial voices.

The first *Cyber Chat* – "Cyber Chat, Cyber Spat" – emerged organically from a series of Skype-inspired responses to assignments between January and November 2009, without an artistic director or aesthetic restrictions on each member's contribution. Cynthia created a sound-score to evoke the bad reception and overlapping voices of our online administrative meetings, to which Shyamala and Sandra created mock-Skype call videos that re-contextualize Indian gestures and facial expression for a webcam. Building on what had emerged by chance, Cynthia and Anjali created Skype-inspired videos as well. Though initially envisioned as live group choreography, the distance caused us to translate it into video form, cementing our shift towards online cultural production. Sangita Shresthova edited all four videos into "Cyber Chat, Cyber Spat," a loop of humorous combinations of solos, duets and a quartet,[8] which playfully strips Indian classical dance of its timeless, spiritual veneer by placing us in the context of the Skype call and our quotidian lives: trying to communicate with each other

7 Examples include "Make-Your-Own-Padam," "Rasa Rerouted," and *SUNOH! Tell Me Sister*'s pre-show installation (documented on www.postnatyam.blogspot.com)

8 Screened at an art installation, TRACE, in Los Angeles. See http://postnatyam.blogspot.com/2010/01/remembering-trace.html

while quieting noisy babies or drinking coffee bleary-eyed, our art-making is interlaced with domesticity. Locating us in our individual homes, the piece provides geographical context rather than placing us in the "no-place" (Bench 2010a: 54) of the black box or green screen that typifies many dance-media works.

However, many of us felt that the individual parts of "Cyber Chat, Cyber Spat" were effective as solos but too chaotic and unrelated as a quartet: the individual voices were strong, but the collective voice was less coherent. We revised "Cyber Chat, Cyber Spat," translating an artistic idea that had emerged organically into a tightly controlled choreographic process with an intricate timeline. Consciously utilizing our assignment process to co-create a dance-for-camera piece across distance rather than letting chance elements emerging from our process determine the artistic outcome, Sangita and Cynthia, co-facilitators of "Cyber Chat Revisted," specified rules to create clear relationships, encourage more stylistic consistency (fixed camera, no editing), and ensure all elements of the sound-score were addressed: "Cyber Chat Revisted" was created through an "iterative sequence wherein each member created their own cyber chat set to their own sub-track of the audio while watching previous members' interpretations" (Shreshtova 2010).[9]

The making of "Cyber Chat Revisited" reflected a new understanding gleaned from an organizational restructuring process. Realizing that it was not always empowering or efficient for all collective members to be equally involved in every decision, the collective was changing toward a clearer division of roles and responsibilities to empower individuals to take initiative to facilitate a project/process. The resulting video-solos were not as interesting as stand-alone works, but the quartet emphasized the relationships between us while maintaining a sense of multivocality: the collective voice was crafted to become stronger than each individual voice.

The Process of Choreographing Coalition: SUNOH! Tell Me, Sister

The *Cyber Chat* series exemplifies a shifting politics of process, negotiating between individual and collective authorial voices. By contrast, the politico-aesthetic conflicts between members when creating the live performance, *SUNOH! Tell Me, Sister,*[10] exemplify the choreographic process of coalitional politics. As an example, we will dissect the negotiations behind making a section of *SUNOH!*, which catalyzed tension between creating images of empowerment through community activism and portraying politico-aesthetic complexity for a theatrical context.

Community activism was introduced to the project in accordance with the community partnership requirement of *SUNOH!'s* producer, TeAda Pro-

9 See http://postnatyam.blogspot.com/2010/09/cyber-chat-revisited.html

10 From here on identified as *SUNOH!*

Picture 2: "My Silent Cry"/"The Thorn, the Leaf, and the Butterfly"

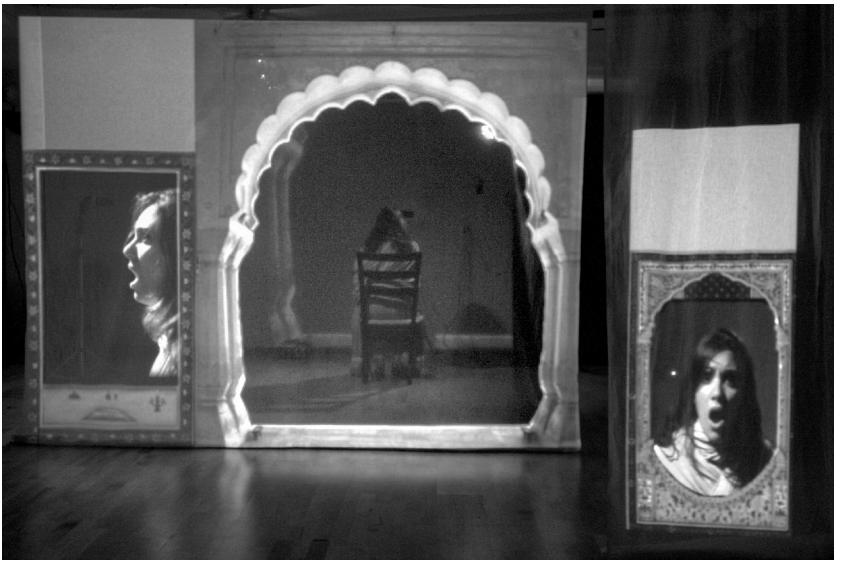
performer: Shyamala Moorty
photo by Andrei Andreev; multimedia design by Carole Kim

ductions, with Shyamala's community-based work expanded to the larger collective.[11] Based on her work with AWAZ, the Southern California-based South Asian Network's (SAN) support group for survivors of domestic violence, Shyamala created a short choreography, "My Silent Cry," in collaboration with survivor Uma Singh, who had asked Shyamala to interview her about surviving a thirty-year abusive marriage. Their duet was a variation on "verbatim theater," where interviews with usually marginalized subjects serve as a foundation for a script performed by professional actors (Heddon 2008: 127). Their joint performance at a SAN community event, where Uma spoke her story while Shyamala, bound in forty feet of white cloth, struggled, broke free, and transformed into a butterfly, was Uma's coming out as a survivor to her community. According to Shyamala, the performance was deeply transformative for Uma, herself, and the SAN community.

Nevertheless, incorporating the community-based performance, "My Silent Cry," into the collective's project led to politico-aesthetic disputes. For Cynthia, "My Silent Cry," while effective in a community context, had a script too blatant for the theater and was aesthetically disconnected from the project's investment in India's historical dancer-courtesans. Cynthia therefore drew from Uma's interview to rewrite a courtesan poem by the seventeenth-century poet Ksettraya. Highlighting resonances between the poem's refrain, "I

11 Los Angeles-based Cynthia participated in Shyamala's monthly AWAZ workshops, while the entire collective participated long-distance by choreographing studies to survivors' writings.

Picture 3: "The Thorn, the Leaf, and the Butterfly"



performer: Shyamala Moorty
photo by Andrei Andreev; multimedia design by Carole Kim

didn't say a word," and an incident where Uma refused "to tell her husband that she love[d] him when he [came] home, drunk, and demand[ed] that she profess her love," Cynthia aimed to "capitaliz[e] on the ambiguity of a woman's silence, which can be both passivity and resistance" (Lee 2010a).

A politico-aesthetic disagreement unfolded on the blog between Shyamala and Cynthia: Shyamala was interested in a clear arc from oppression to empowerment, while Cynthia wanted to evoke complex, emotional nuances. While excited "about the potential connection to the poetic tradition of the courtesans and the SAN women's experience" (Moorty 2010), Shyamala articulated concern that the ambiguous ending of Cynthia's poem was "tragic" (ibid.), suggesting that the poem end on an empowering note of resistance instead. For Cynthia, however, this change rendered the husband "flatter and more evil," "romanticizing the moment of transformation" when "acts of resistance are contingent, momentary, provisional and . . . you never fully escape" (Lee 2010b). Together with collective member Anjali and multimedia collaborator Carole Kim, they revised the piece during a residency in Los Angeles, integrating the two conflicting politico-aesthetic approaches and incorporating South Asian aesthetics such as live video feed of *abhinaya* (facial expression) and *mudras* (hand gestures), visual references to Mughal miniatures, and the rewritten Ksettraya poem. Ultimately, we created two versions of the piece: "My Silent Cry," a standalone piece suitable for survivors' groups and women's shelters, and "The Thorn, the Leaf, and the Butterfly," which related clearly to the aesthetic themes of *SUNOH!* and targeted a theatrical audience.

Throughout the revision process from a community-based performance to an abstracted choreography, Shyamala was concerned whether the increased abstraction created too much distance from Uma's story. The ethics of verbatim theater are indeed complex, for as performance scholar Deirdre Heddon explains, these projects aim to give "voice to the voiceless" (2008: 129) but run the risk of appropriating the voice of the other, giving the appearance of an authentic retelling when they are actually highly mediated by the artists' agendas (2008: 133). Whereas Uma's performative presence in "My Silent Cry" authenticates the story without foregrounding Shyamala's authorial hand, the abstraction of "The Thorn, the Leaf, and the Butterfly" de-emphasizes Uma's voice but makes no claims to literal truth. It remains debatable whether "aestheticizing" the work made it less accessible to the community from which it emerged. While Uma enjoyed our show, an activist felt the work was too abstract to be readable to working-class domestic violence survivors.

Shyamala remained in constant conversation with Uma throughout the revision process because, importantly, "[e]thical practice is located not only in the finished 'product', but also in the process" (Heddon 2008: 155). This accords with philosopher Margaret Urban Walker's "'expressive-collaborative' model" as a feminist model of ethics that "plac[es] at its centre the practice of negotiation between people in deciding appropriate ethical behavior," as opposed to the "juridical-theoretical model" (Walker in Heddon 2008: 152), a masculinist ethical model that emphasizes abstract, universal principles of justice (Garlough, in press).

These politico-aesthetic negotiations surrounding "My Silent Cry"/"The Thorn, the Leaf, and the Butterfly" largely transpired locally in Los Angeles, but disagreement about relating "courtesan" material to domestic violence also created rockiness in the long-distance process. Sandra, far away in Munich, had less opportunity to articulate her position in favor of a complex exploration of the courtesan as artist, not only victim. Simultaneously, Shyamala was worried about creating more shame for the survivors by associating them with courtesans.

This disagreement, exacerbated by an imbalance between local and long-distance engagement, put the collective into a moment of "crisis." The aesthetic requirements of the evening-length theatrical performance, which demand a dramatic arc and through line, do not allow for the same unruly fragmentation of a blog or art installation with multiple voices co-existing in the same space. Some of us wondered whether it was even viable to work collaboratively when our politico-aesthetic differences were so strong:

- How can we bring all of those streams together and still make a project that holds together?
- Do we sacrifice depth for breadth?
- By combining this material, can we do justice to the histories of the courtesans and to the stories of the women in the community based support group?
- As activists, do we need to speak from a "unified" position to make an argument?

As a collective of women choreographers of color, we are not unified in our aesthetics or our relationships to feminism and activism. At the same time, by working through our disagreements politically and aesthetically, we hope to enrich our work and extend its reach. In order to choreograph our coalition, our artistic negotiations have to make room for and actively support each other's individual political investments while being unafraid to bring our politico-aesthetic disagreements to the forefront. We sought to build a "viable oppositional alliance" of women of color while acknowledging our individual differences by identifying a "common context of struggle" (Mohanty 2003: 49) for *SUNOH!* as resistances to patriarchal structures in diverse contexts and registers. We expanded our initial focus from the courtesan's legacy to "women's stories of being silenced, finding voice, and the importance of sisterly[12] community" (Chatterjee, Lee, Moorty, and Tata 2011a). Weaving together courtesan histories, stories of domestic violence survivors, and our own personal struggles with tradition, we hoped to create "political links . . . among and between struggles" (Mohanty 2003: 46) without compromising the historical and sociocultural specificity of any specific perspective. The autobiographical stories further served to reveal our personal investment in the material and in our distinct politico-aesthetic approaches.

Lastly, in line with Butler (2004), we chose to integrate our disagreements into the performance rather than cover up tensions. The premiere included "meta-theatrical" (Heddon 2008: 153) moments such as a Skype-style video of Sandra critiquing the lack of the "radiant," erotically powerful courtesan in *SUNOH!*[13] Shyamala integrated her "self-reflexive" (ibid) perspective while performing an autobiographical section, "I see, but . . .":

> They don't know that [the courtesans] were the bearers of our dance traditions, economically independent artists, powerful business women, landowners, even revolutionaries! No, all people think about courtesans is (slaps butt). But Uma and the other survivors already feel so much (arms wrap around body in shame). . . .
>
> I can't help but see the connections, but I'm afraid of putting them together. But if I don't, then I' m not interested in the courtesans, or even in Indian dance, unless I can relate it to the world I'm living in, to the women I'm working with, and to the things I care about. Tell me sisters, what should we do? (Moorty 2011)

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12 "Sisterly" in this piece is drawn from an ethnographic interview with a courtesan in Lucknow, India in the 1980s (Oldenburg 1990: 268 and 285). In a South Asian context, "sister" resonates differently than the feminist idea of "global sisterhood," which can be seen as contradicting the idea of coalition (Mohanty 2003: 106–123). Sociologist Patricia Jeffrey writes: "Sister' comes to mind not primarily because of a Western feminist rhetoric, but because the sister-sister can be used in South Asia to to express fictive kinship, even across caste and other boundaries" (1998: 228). Individual collective members relate to the term sister differently.

13 Screened in the premiere but removed later for dramaturgical reasons.

Conclusion: "Yes to Process," "Yes to Each Other"[14]

In conclusion, the collective's online assignment process has transformed Post *Natyam's* collaboration from live performance to internet-based cultural production. The assignment process strongly brings out the individual aesthetic/political voices of the four members, which come together on our blog. Online, media-based projects seeded from this process negotiate the power dynamics of collaboration, striking a balance between individual leadership and collective voice. Members also translate the materials created online into live performance interventions. During collaboration, our different feminist politico-aesthetic stances often require negotiation, for bringing together our voices can both enrich and undermine each other's political efficacy. The conflicts between the members' intertwined politics and artistic practices are partially resolved online and partially in person without always affecting the entire collective.

After *SUNOH!*, we evaluated the creation process to identify best practices for negotiating between the individual and the collective, between working long-distance and live. How might we cultivate multiple voices while strengthening our shared politics and pushing the envelope as artists? How might we reconsider our modes of choreographic production to suit our increasingly internet-based, transnational nature? To address and catalyze these concerns, we co-wrote and are co-choreographing a manifesto (Chatterjee, Lee, Moorty and Tata 2011), which has confirmed our desire to elevate process over product. As opposed to a dance company dedicated to performing together live, the main purpose of our transnational collective is to share an online creative process, where we translate each other's material into our own individual, localized products. We are also discussing alternative ways of presenting our work through online sharing, web-streaming, and using Web 2.0 tools to draw in public participation – formats more suitable to our internet-based communication. The staging of our process in the product itself is a technique that has served us well in both *SUNOH! Tell Me, Sister* and in the *Cyber Chats*. We believe that performing our negotiations, dis/agreements and questions strengthens, rather than undercuts, the solidarity of our collective voice.

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