

Listening - Sound Narratives of a Dance

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Through a practice of listening, I engage with manifold layers, which inform, influence and shape my approach to dance. Actively listening to dance encourages to perceive movement not only through the eyes, but through the sense of hearing. By doing this I learn to stay present, unlearn and relearn meanings attached to the sound source, as the practice of listening requires an openness towards what is being listened to. Not seeking one particular answer, this practice developed from my continued engagement with epistemologies of dance: a field in particular pressured by questions of representation and gaze, as it is an art form dealing with what is closest to us: the body. The foundation of my dance training is Bharatanatyam, a descendant of the temple and court dances of India¹. These practices of the Devadasis – the temple dancers –, which is referred to as the origins of this dance, has gone through a complex history of diverse local contexts and reali-

ties, to the abolishment through the colonial powers and is today performed as this reinvented form known as Bharatanatyam. Today it is learned in many regions of South Asia and the diaspora. After training and performing this form since childhood, I took a break to comprehend the meaning of a form being developed from a ritual dance to what is today called a classical dance and the confusing contradictions it comes with.

This writing addresses how a listening practice enables me to re-enter the vocabulary, music, philosophy, mythology and somatics of the dance, to more deeply comprehend what it teaches about the body, as well as the body's inner and outer relations in dance and everyday life. The writing makes space for thinking about how this listening practice can be understood as a proposal to critically, openly and poetically engage with passed on knowledge through decolonial strategies, queer reclamations and ecological reflections. Insisting on a commitment to this dance and practices close to it and staying with the trouble, not only in theory but within an artistic practice, is a response to the prejudiced dichotomies of tradition² and progress and the consequences of past and present day marginalisation and discrimination of *othered* bodies, practices and methodologies of knowledge production. In the sections that follow, I introduce the different modes of listening central to my practice: listening to dance itself as a sonic experience; listening to the sounds of the environment; listening to music/sound compositions; listening to personal and historical narratives.

ON SOUNDS OF TREES AND TRANSFORMING SKINS

Each time I go for a walk and the wind blows through the branches of a tree – in the urban space with a strangely measured distance to another – I listen to those branches beginning to wave and the

leaves clapping against each other. It is my favourite song, my favourite dance. Hundreds of little tingling sounds played by foliage, a collective consisting of single leaf members, reflecting colours of themselves, of each other, of the sun and what is around them. I have noticed that this way of listening pulls me to the present and helps me to breathe. It tingles under my skin, which feels as if it expands into the space. It is as if the boundary between my body and the space it is surrounded by softens. I feel how the space breathes through me and I through the space. It makes me feel small and wide at the same time: small as I realize how much more I need this exchange than the tree does and wide as I begin to feel not separate, but part of it. A blurring of entities in space, recognizing the commonalities while embracing the differences. When stepping into waters it is a particularly vibrant version of space getting in touch with my skin. Kindly carrying my body, splashing drops into my eyes and eardrums, changing my experience of sound as a child of the city and its constant urban drone. I would take walks in the forest with occasional dips into lakes, listening to organisms I am surrounded by and notice that by listening I could understand better. Not necessarily by defining the sound of what I am listening to and aiming to put it into a human-made word, but by letting be what is and letting me be what I am. And in doing so, the visual sense, which so quickly cognitively links with the habit of defining what is thought to be seen and the judgment it comes with, has changed for me. This may as well be what the practice of meditation does. If I think of it, I can call this a kind of meditation, that allows movement and activates a certain mindfulness towards the environment, my body and situating one in the other.

The feeling in my body and skin while doing this practice of listening also guides back to mythological stories and the language of Bharatanatyam. Stories and dances my mother has taught me. And so I relate the experience of the forest walks to South Asian myths of celestial beings represented as mountains, waters, plants and curious

hybrids of beings. Already in the *namaskaram*, a small sequence before each dance, Bhūma Devi, representing Mother Earth, is saluted, by guiding a touch from the ground to the eyes with the hands. A simple gesture of acknowledgement. Listening to trees may just be something like that.

OF SONGS, FLUID BODIES, TEACHINGS OF A MOTHER AND BLURRED BORDERS

lalita lavanga latA pariSeelana kOmala malaya sameerE

A cool breeze of spring season

from clove bushes is gently blowing

— Ashtapadi, song 3

I remember when my mother taught me the Asthapadis of the *Gita Govinda*: a poetry work of songs and hymns about Radha, “a subversive and all-too human emblem of mortal and divine love” (Lal, Malashri; Gokhale, Namita, 2018, p.1) and Krishna, a forest cowherd and deity countering hegemonic masculinity, composed in the 12th century by the poet Jeyadeva: here I have learned for the first time to not only use the *mudras*³ used in dance as separate movements in order to narrate a story, but to move them fluidly through space, depicting for example a leaf going from one, to the next, to another. Connected, not disrupted. This way of fluidly moving through space, even if only with the hands, within this rather rigid and geometrical form Bharatanatyam has become, has shifted my understanding of *abhinaya*⁴ – the emotive telling of a story. It opened up more flexible possibilities of connecting the imaginary (the leaf in the story), the real (my present body) and blurring the two. If I apply this mode of being fluid in a *nritta* (abstract dance) moment, even this moment gets filled with emotion. By doing this, I experience that not direct-

ly representing or telling a story does not mean that emotion is absent. We experience this especially in instrumental sound and music works. Using a *mudra* fluidly rather than rigidly, opens up space in my joints. Space, which is more than mere anatomy. Space that is filled with energy and emotion. And so *abhinaya* begins to emerge, even without a direct acting out of a story line, which *bhava* (expressive technique in the performing arts), is often reduced to. I am curious to explore these moments, by being present through an interplay of moving, listening, pausing, resting and how that transforms, transmits and becomes what is called *rasa*⁵, an intangible emotive space. Even though my first encounter with the Ashtapadi is around 17 years ago, it deeply impacts my practice of today more consciously within an embodied philosophy of being fluid in dance and life. In conventional trainings body and gender fluidity within our dance traditions are neither discussed, nor linked. But it is very much there, right in front of us, in the many mythologies of transforming, multi- and cross-hybrid deities, where set categorizations of gender and fluid forms of intimacies are absurd. To me this multiplicity of fluidity as both imaginary and lived are deeply connected.

The popularity of the Ashtapadi songs crosses states from the deep South to the North and East of the subcontinent. I imagine that this has to do with the sensuous quality of the narration, as well as the sound of the music compositions, which merge and melt from one tone and word to the next. I wonder if this compositional fluidity is connected to the local practices of where the *Gita Govinda* was written, in Orissa. In their local dance practice Odissi I observe a sensual fluidity of the body curving through sculptural postures, unlike in Bharatanatyam, where sensuality is rather frowned upon, which can be traced back to the abolishment of the dance as the Devadasis were stigmatized as sex-workers. With the reinvention in the early 20th century, spine movements were quite literally stiffened for acceptance. Reflecting on the latter has helped me to rethink the boundaries creat-

ed through the borders of the colonial and neocolonial idea of the nation state, by looking at the commonalities and influences of the different dance and music practices, while embracing the differences.

When I began to allow the fluidity learned through the Ashtapadi sink into my chest and hips, it began to curve my spine, which soon felt like throwing a stone into the water – a cause and effect of waves and shifts until it is time to rest. Listening to these compositions with the same intention as I do to trees and waters, expands possibilities of working with the movement vocabulary of this dance background. It becomes less about set choreographies, but more about ephemeral moments of a body in motion. To me, a sense for fluidity has become crucial for my listening: both defy hierarchical and categorizational conditions. I can't listen unbendingly if I genuinely want to listen. And further I can't move rigidly, if I genuinely do listen. Metaphorically, but also quite literally in terms of how to hold, position or move my body when I listen and vice versa. Sitting on a chair or lying on a floor completely changes the way the sound reaches the ear and hence the whole experience. The same would apply to a moving body. Adding fluid qualities to this practice is certainly not a requirement, but it makes the somatic experience of both listening and dancing so much richer.

LISTENING TO DANCE

A ball, inside a ball. Thrusting, stroking, banging, rolling, falling. Standing still. A metal ball, inside another ball of brass. Moving when the body moves and continuing to stroke the coating even if the body pauses. A matter of microseconds. It is like hearing one's pulse in stillness. Or hearing the waves of the water in the distance, when one just quiets down for a moment. Or the birds, or the clapping of leaves on each other on a windy day. Or hearing the absence of it. The bird



not present, the trees not present. Other beings – not present. The *Salangai*, footbells, used in many Indian dances are a sound signifier of movement. The experience of dance with and without the bells is of tremendous difference. The soundscape created by dance through the bells creates an incomparable sensorial experience, not only to the outside, but already from the interior experience of being the dancer. In early years I have often been disappointed by the rare usage of the footbells being reserved for moments of public performances. But as an instrument to me the *Salangai* offer more than a mere amplification of movement in hours when a piece has been trained to perfection. The relationship of instrument and body suggests that the dance is not only a dance, but a sonic experience, a music piece in itself, as part of a dance. It expresses that the dance becomes more present and alive, through its sound and not only through an added music piece. This is especially noticeable in northern Kathak dance and its intense footwork creating vast soundscapes. It indeed can be understood as a direct translation of movement into sound, but at the same time it has its own life, resonating back to the body in a way that has its own response, like all acoustic instruments do, in particular those in close proximity to the body. This can be well heard in the use of the northern Thai instrument *phin pia*, a string zither, where the chest is used to resonate the sound. When the body is still, the bells tied around the ankles still resonate to minor movements of the muscles, little cracks in the ankle joints and pulsation of the blood. This tells me tales of presence and absence, of silence and noise, of movement and stillness.

What if I do not only dance in set rhythms? What if the way I move the hand *mudra* in the Ashtapadi resonates into my foot and initiates another movement, another sound? What if a curved spine sounds different in the ankle bells? What are the different volumes at play: the volume of the body, the volume of movement, the volume of sound, the volume of space? How can I explore the differ-

ent types of resonances: the resonance of the bells and the resonance of the body? What if a dance is a song and a song is a dance? How does hearing myself dance affect the movement? And why is a dancer in these dance practices both dancer and musician? The traditional training involves not only dance, but also the study of *sollukattus* – the rhythmic language for dance and percussion –, singing the compositions and understanding the *ragas* and texts in various languages, mostly Tamizh, Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada and Hindi. I indeed understand the content better with the information through language, but why is sound and voice in a performance today conventionally given to another person? Why have all these entities, being part of one dance practice, been separated in the performance? Why has it become something to remain in studio and study chambers and the musical arrangements fully been given to an orchestra? I understand the beauty of the collaboration between musician and dancer. But is that so that the dancer has more capacity to perfect the form and if so, is this for reasons of entertainment aesthetics as part of the modern era of dance, influenced by ideologies and staging of ballet? If my reasons to dance are not the latter – entertaining –, can I find new meanings within old strategies and practices, which approached all the described layers as a whole? This is not a question of authenticity. But as a dancer I seek to re-enter the *traditions* I have learned in ways, which do not copy alterations to the dance I perceive as unnecessary or even violent, while giving space for explorations. And understanding what is *traditional* about a reinvented form in the first place.

When exploring dance within a listening practice, I sense a resemblance to moments in the forest to dancing the Ashtapadi: skin tingling, breath changing, moving, resting, activating, acknowledging, feeling small and wide, being fluid. When I listen, I give up repetitive ways of directing and controlling my body and movement and negotiate to explore the space with the help of the bells and the sound of movement. This experience expands my understanding of time: set

minutes, set rhythms and sequences morph into a rather fluid understanding of time, where the body is given space to find a relation to what the body is surrounded by, through exploring, activity, resting – *b e i n g* . To find out what the movement sounds like and what it tells me about space, as well as time versus timing. The perceived expansion of time can be well heard in the Dhrupad and Thumri singing practices: both distinct, but having in common durational, meditative and almost trance-like qualities. As a yearlong admirer of these music practices it would be wrong to deny their influence on my listening and dancing, despite the different contexts they come with.

INTERSECTING MANIFOLD MODES OF LISTENING AS A DECOLONIAL STRATEGY

There are many existing approaches to listening, which are mainly dealt with from the perspective of sound art, meditation and healing practices. And in this last section of the writing I share selected voices of practitioners and researchers, who attend to the same and similar topics and respond to them through my own writing voice. The artist Salomé Voegelin writes in her book dedicated entirely to listening:

Seeing always happens in a meta-position, away from the seen, however close. And this distance enables a detachment and objectivity that presents itself as truth. Seeing is believing. The visual ‘gap’ nourishes the idea of structural certainty and the notion that we can truly understand things, give them names, and define ourselves in relation to those names as stable subjects, as identities. By contrast, hearing is full of doubt: phenomenological doubt of the listener about the heard and himself hearing it. Hearing does not offer a meta-position; there is no place where I am not simultaneous with the heard.

However far its source, the sound sits in my ear. I cannot hear it if I am not immersed in its auditory object, which is not its source but sound as sound itself. Consequently, a philosophy of sound art must have at its core the principle of sharing time and space with the object or event under consideration. (Voegelin, 2010, p. XII)

As a dancer, listening to me is a practice for the sake of the practice itself: experiencing different qualities of sounds and body and their relation in effect and affect. I am interested in how sounds involve me as a listener, move me emotionally, but also physically. And further understanding the body and dance as the sound source within this practice, while engaging with the sound itself as its own entity as a result of movement. It is an interest in abstraction, where I leave out narration, in order to stay present with the sounds and refrain from attaching meaning and hence judgment on them, which is where a deeper experience of sound and hence its source, usually ends. I leave it up to an exploration to navigate through an open interplay of movement creating sound and sound bouncing back to the ear: the sound stops (at least in a generalized volume perception) when the body is in stillness. This silence, however, I understand as part of the movement and soundscape that explores perception of time and space as well as contractions and expansions of sounds. Perhaps this can be imagined similar to moments between inhales and exhales or the contractions of muscles. However, as abstract as this mode of listening is, it also is a response to a gaze *othering* from an orientalist point of view. A dance that proposes listening hence asks the listener to challenge their gaze and be present in an audio-sensorial situation.

As Voegelin writes:

Listening, in this sense, is an aesthetic activity that challenges the philosophical tradition of the West, which, according to film the-

orist Christian Metz, is based on a hierarchy between the senses which positions sound in the attributal location, sublimated to the visual and its linguistic structure. In that position sound is left to describe and enhance but never to do and become. (Voegelin, 2010, p. 13)

Similar to this position of sound, dance practitioners not coming from a Western lineage of art are continuously denied entry to ontologies of *doing* and *becoming*: we are left to represent, justify and describe to either sceptics of *traditions* or to curatorial concepts of empowering an *othered* body with sometimes genuine, but often pretentious charitable grandiosity, seeking to satisfy a fetishizing eye within the markets of art. Both situations – are gut wrenching. With the burden of a colonial past, which in this case led to the abolishment of local dance practices, to the reinvention of them as constructed traditions, used for false propagation of an ancient past, class and cast divides for performers, our positions as dancers today remain complicated. The reinvented *tradition* is both problematic and eminent in the attempt of repair for the idea of a postcolonial nation. It is its' exclusiveness and disregard for the rightful lineage of the temple dancers, that remains disturbing. The term *tradition* (Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983) is of course loaded, but too complex to be abandoned with simple one-sided argumentation and the same applies to *ritual* as a term and idea. It is not a secret anymore, that Bharatanatyam is a reinvented form and the label of *tradition* a strategic marker⁶. In theory it is perhaps easy to take one position, but as a practitioner this is a much more complicated reality, as we do not only deal with theoretical terms, but with practices. The term *classical* attached to the dance is even more problematic, as it copies ideologies and aesthetics of Western classical art: all that, which modern and contemporary dance movements oppose, was imposed and at the same time strategically glorified from within. As a practitioner today, who seeks to critically reflect through practice and cannot rely on theory alone, it

has been and most likely will continue to be a challenging journey to withstand unreflected and uninformed interventions and demands to explain more than being encouraged to deepen a practice, that seeks to find genuine decolonial strategies, rather than to either carry on a recent lineage of conceited classicism, or simply move to the obliviousness of Western contemporary dance and its equally constructed idea of *progressiveness* (Bhambra, 2007), which is likely more than partially based on non-Western ideas and philosophies. I do not share the same fear of form and old teachings towards a never-ending search for originality. Chaos, color, improvisation, drone, durational and meditative qualities, to name a few, are not new to many artistic practices labeled as *classical* and *traditional* in many regions of South Asia today – in dance and music. But both ideologies – *classical/traditional* – have deeply changed exactly those qualities. However, remaining in a constructed category of *tradition* as a result of a past as described, is an equally discontented experience. With consideration of the history and strategic usage of the categorization of *traditional*, *classical* and *contemporary* as conflicting and hierarchical, I stand critical towards all of them as terminologies. In view of these constructed boundaries, I seek to explore possibilities of working with the material openly, but mindfully. I resonate with the words of dancer and choreographer Chandralekha:

I have increasingly been disturbed by current Western critical opinion which so effortlessly glamorizes and valorizes Eastern ‘traditions’ in an uncritical manner entirely from an orientalist’ and patronizing perspective. For us, in our Eastern contexts, both our ‘traditionality’ and our ‘modernity’ are complex and problematic areas which are not abstract theoretical categories but real every day concerns – both of life and of performing arts. (Chandralekha 2010, p. 378)

The same applies to diasporic contexts and perhaps becomes even

more complicated, as in my experience an unreflected critique on authenticity on the location of voice continues to censor diasporic communities. In my case, the shared Dravidian, Tamizh culture of Tamizh Nadu and the island of Sri Lanka, where my mother would fall in love with Bharatanatyam and like other comrades would bring it passed the forts of Europe to Germany, seeking new hope, which got lost to a war in her homeland. With all this in mind – both in cognitive and physical memory – this listening practice is an act of resistance in a world where the constant drone of the ongoing colonial project of capitalism/progressive modernity drowns voices and narratives of people and countless species in a never-ending machinery, where the body is fully mechanized in order to be part of it: to quiet down and listen with depth and care to subtleties, silences and noises alike and dance, is empowering to me, with or without putting a narration or a loud political statement on top. It proposes to be a soft resistance within a harsh world. And when I write of silence I make a difference between a sonic silence within an artistic practice, to staying silent in unjust situations.

The construct of national umbrella languages, inconsiderate of the many local differences of the use and function of the word, is in itself violent. By forcing people to adopt the languages of the colonizer and ideologies they come with (*objective, scientific, rational, heteronormative*), they play a major role in the erasure of various local epistemologies. Here I propose listening, even before language enters, as a decolonial strategy applying it to various modes of listening. Using this practice to spend time with organisms and living beings, listening to mountains, winds, waters, plants and other beings, can be used as an approach to unlearn anthropocentric points of views.

Knowledge of the colonized world, and its increasingly transformed nature, was intrinsic to colonial domination (Pratt, 1992; Drayton, 2000). (...) The ‘Orientalist’ discourses of colo-

nialism (Said, 1978; Moore-Gilbert, 1997) took as their subjects both people and nature. Indeed, the two were commonly linked in loosely theorized (and deeply racist) discourses that dismissed as unordered, undisciplined, worthless and uncivilized the ‘wildness’ of exotic and remote peoples and landscapes. For indigenous peoples, colonialism reached ‘into our heads’ (Smith, 1999), and it did the same (with very different implications) for the colonizer: colonization changed the very categories within which nature and society were conceived. (William M Adams and Martin Mulligan, 2003, p. 4)

To engage with the *environment* through modes of listening requires an openness towards what is being listened to in flexible and humble ways and proposes to assist in rethinking the notions of *human* and *nature* as separate and the latter being subordinated to the first. Even if it does not offer practical solutions necessary to act against the environmental crises, it intends to contribute to the conversations around the issues through an embodied philosophy as part of this listening practice, not only through cognitive, but kinaesthetic learning. It can be as simple as taking a walk in a forest or by the sea, taking a deep breath and feeling transformed, even healed. I perceive this as a dialogue between various beings: rather through words, through breathing, being together, listening. Incorporating this into my dance practice certainly informs the dance by stimulating somatic awareness, mindful sensing and decision-making, as well as physical fluidity. And I further link this with fluidity in gender: not necessarily as an explicit gender category as often described in more Eurocentric queer discourses. There are many subtle hints in mythology, but also clear evidence in various texts and it is important to note that my writing is not a modern queering of texts but a re-entering of abandoned ones under colonial rule. Many precolonial societies and groups of people have embraced queer existences not only in myths, but through their own terminolo-

gies and even legal protections. The Kamashastra, the book of love and desire (written between 3rd and 1st centuries BCE), refers to people of third nature, as *tritya-prakriti* and it is stated in the Arthashastra, an Indian treatise on politics, economics, the function of the state and social organization (written between 3rd century BCE and 2nd century CE), that nobody can insult or do an act of cruelty against them, for which a specified punishment under law existed. With the use of religion as part of the colonial project, the notion of queer identities was strategically labeled as *unnatural*. And so decolonizing relationships of *natural* and *unnatural*, whether plant bodies or queer bodies, by reclaiming and rereading passed on knowledge is essential to the fluid listening explorations within my body practice. In her writing the scholar Ruth Vanita wonderfully makes sense of how she uses mythologies to reclaim queer, as well as interspecies inclusions within precolonial agreements of sharing an ecosystem and life on this planet:

The single most remarkable feature of medieval stories of the deities is their multiplicity and variability. Almost any variation that can be imagined exists somewhere. Capable of taking on any form, the divine is made available in multiple ways (...) as infinitely flexible and available – as male, female, neuter; as animal, bird, tree, jewel, river; as present in all elements and all forms of life. The Puranic gods are not just celebrated as omnipresent in a philosophical sense; the stories of their doings represent them as taking on all forms, incarnating as different types of creatures (for instance, Vishnu is incarnated as a boar and a fish) including humans of different ages, castes and genders. The absence of any clearcut philosophical boundary between gods and humans, or indeed gods and other living beings, allows for the deifying of all actions and every way of life. (Vanita, 2000, p. 58 – 59)

And lastly, I experience the tremendous healing effects of listening on the body, as various listening practices propose. Here, it is necessary to point out again the issue of the Euro-Americentric lineage of art. When writing about a practice that can be clearly linked to sound art, the first people one might think of are John Cage and Pauline Oliveros, who undoubtedly are important figures in their contexts. But it is necessary to give balance to an imbalance and misconceptions of a narrative dominated by Euro-America continuously announcing itself as the pioneers of innovation, progressive and contemporary ideas. Hence it is important to clarify that their work has not been influential to mine. It is no surprise to get to know, that Oliveros, who coined the term *Deep Listening*, was influenced by Native American ritual, meditation and music practices, and Cage by the work of Sri Lankan philosopher and historian Ananda Coomaraswamy and the Indian musician Gita Sarabhai, who taught him of the depiction of eight emotions in the concept of *rasa* aesthetics, as well as Zen Buddhism, having profound influence on his approach to music. Due to my interest in sound and performance I am often asked how Cage's work influenced my listening practice, rather than for example Chandralekha or even the idea of *rasa*. And I want to answer this here explicitly: not at all. I draw from the idea of *rasa*, trees in forests, waters, the idea of morning and evening *ragas*, diasporic bubbles, the people I am referencing, as well as wonderful colleagues, Krishna and other hybrids, Thumri songs rupturing my heart, Druphad vocal drones and a life-long engagement with dance and music. And so I am particularly excited to have come across Nada Yoga, which links body and sound in one practice. The precision already of the description from a practice that thinks about sound from the body and not from an external instrument, of course fascinates me, as this is also what my work reflects about. And probably not as deep as this yogic practice already does.

Nada Yoga is about sounds. It is the knowledge of the quality of sounds and the way they affect people. The word Nada comes from the Sanskrit root, Nad. Nad means to flow. The etymological meaning of Nada is a process or a stream of consciousness. Generally, the word Nada means sound. In Tantra, it is thought that sound occurs in four dimensions – four levels of sound relating to frequency, degree of fineness and strength. 1. The coarse (ordinary audible, material) sound, 2. the mental sound, 3. the visualised sound and 4. the transcendent sound. According to Nada Yogis and scriptures dealing with Nada Yoga, the original and transcendent sound is the seed from which the whole of creation has grown. The Nada Yogi experiences the macro cosmic universe as a projection of sound vibrations; the whole world as having developed from sound alone. (Janakananda, 2009 / 2016)

I do recall how the beginnings of this listening practice quickly synchronized with my Yoga routines, not in a matter of simultaneity but frequency. Listening after aligning, specific and conscious breathing, activating, stretching, sweating, meditating and resting undoubtedly enhances and deepens my hearing experience. I have neither experienced nor learned a Nada Yoga practice. But in the spirit of both – exploring practices deepening listening as a bodily experience, as well as decolonizing a Euro-Americentric lineage of progressive (here sound) art, I can't wait to find my way towards this Nada Yoga practice in the future.

The different modes of listening inform each other on essential levels: diving into different modes of listening to sounds, stories and dances is a process of learning and reflecting, being present, responding, exploring, embodying and giving visibility to them in a process of rethinking a methodology of making visible: rather than proposing a voyeuristic experience, a situation of sound involving the

listener and asking them to engage, be present and reflect on the way they digest the heard – here a dance. For me this is an ongoing process of wondering, listening, imagining, dancing, asking, repositioning, renegotiating, exploring, clarifying, unpacking, insisting, trying out and letting go.

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Image on page 26: print by Sigurður Atli Sigurðsson.

NOTES

1. The term *India* is a “historical construct of relatively recent origin” (Vanita, 2000, XV) and compresses a tremendously wide geographical area with an enormous variety of languages, practices and groups under one national umbrella and it remains a challenge to use one word which simplifies this complexity. However, for reader friendly purposes I will use it in consideration of the content and frame of this text.
2. The invention of the terms *tradition* and *progress* as terms themselves are largely responsible for this dichotomy. This is a critique scholars fortunately have attended to for several decades already. There is a complex back and forth of well-formulated arguments and equally exclusions in this debate, such as indigenous practices.
3. *Mudra* means to seal, mark or gesture in Sanskrit and are hand gestures used in many Indian dances used for both abstract dance and story telling. Yogic and tantric practices also include mudras to intensify the effects of yoga or meditation, enhancing the flow of energy. Today’s use of mudras in dance, yogic and practices are not linked and a comparison requires a study of its own.
4. The *Natya Shastra*, a Sanskrit text on performing arts, explains *abhinaya* as *abhi* – towards, and *naya* – to carry: to carry the spectator towards the meaning.
5. “Rasa is an Indian concept of aesthetic flavour and an essential element of any work of visual, literary, or performing art that can only be suggested, not described. It is a kind of contemplative abstraction in which the inwardness of human feelings suffuses the surrounding world of embodied forms.” (Britannica)
6. The research and writings of Davesh Soneji bring a lot of light to this complex history of Bharatanatyam, which are not the focus of this writing, but nevertheless a matter I continue to deal with from within my practice.

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