

Solidarity - rasa/autobiography - abhinaya: South Asian tactics for performing queerness

By: Sandra Chatterjee, [Cynthia Ling Lee](#)

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Abstract:

This article examines the work of D'Lo, a Sri Lankan-transgender-hip hop performance artist, and the Post Natyam Collective, a transnational coalition that develops critical and creative approaches to South Asian dance. The works utilize two strategies for performing queerness in relation to South Asian cultural practices: (1) autobiographic performance art rooted in identity politics and (2) the South Asian technique of abhinaya. These strategies use different modes of identification and audience-performer relationships. Autobiographical solo performance creates solidarity through shared identity or alliances between performer and audience. Abhinaya evokes pleasure and sensuality in multiple, ambiguous ways towards the goal of evoking rasa, ideally the audience's experience of emotional-spiritual transcendence. We investigate tactical crossovers between the strategies of autobiography and abhinaya in D'Lo's and Post Natyam's work: how do they interact, where might they exclude each other, and what kind of performance of queerness emerges through their interplay?

Keywords: South Asian | autobiography | performance | queer | rasaabhinaya

Article:

This article looks at two tactics for performing queerness in relation to South Asian diasporic cultural practices by examining the work of D'Lo, a Tamil Sri Lankan American Hindu transgender queer hip hop performance artist, and work by the Post *Natyam* Collective, a transnational coalition of women choreographers that develops critical and creative approaches to South Asian dance.

Our focus will be on two performance strategies: (1) autobiographical performance art rooted in identity politics and (2) the South Asian technique of *abhinaya*. Because these two strategies operate according to different modes of identification and audience-performer relationships, an investigation of the seemingly opposed audience-performer relationships of (1) connecting via

shared identity constructions and (2) jointly producing the emotional-aesthetic experience of *rasa* forms an important part of our analysis. This article will explore possible crossovers between autobiography and *abhinaya*: how do they interact, where might they exclude each other, and what kind of performance of queerness emerges through their interplay?

Queerness and queering

But first we would like to address what we mean when we say ‘queer’.¹ In contrast to LGBT, which requires members to explicitly self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual/transgender, ‘[q]ueer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant’ (David Halperin, as quoted by Hall 2003: 67). We find the openness of the term ‘queer’ useful for a South Asian context, for the ‘identity categories of sexuality originating in late 19th century Europe’ (Vanita 2002: 1) translate uneasily into postcolonial contexts and their diasporas.

As choreographer-theorists, ‘queering’ histories and canonical theories allows us to tactically re-appropriate hegemonic discourses. In the realm of dance, we see any embodied performance that opens up possibilities for eroticism, sexuality and gender outside of heteronormative patriarchal structures as potentially queer. As choreographer Keith Hennessy and curator Julie Phelps articulate in their call for artists for *TOO MUCH! A Queer Marathon*, ‘queer [can be] an aesthetic, and tactic’; it is not necessarily limited to an expression of ‘personal identity’ (2010).

This raises one of the central questions for our article: what is the relationship between queer autobiographical performance and erotic *abhinaya*, between a performer–audience connection based on shared identity constructions and one based on sharing the transcendent emotional-aesthetic pleasure of *rasa*? *Rasa* refers to aesthetic emotion and literally means ‘juice’: ideally it is the audience’s experience of emotional and spiritual transcendence when witnessing a work of art. In *abhinaya*, usually associated with ‘traditional’ South Asian performance, performers work towards the possibility of *rasa* through interpreting poetic texts, often erotic in nature. They embody familiar, often mythological characters and avoid staging their personal identities. However, in autobiographical performance, the personal serves as a lens into the political. In Lacanian fashion, the audience is invited to identify with the performer (‘Ah, this is my story too!’) or, in an Althusserian framework, audience members may be hailed by the performer’s narrative. This creates a sense of community often predicated on shared identity and experience.

Rasa theory

There are various, sometimes conflicting interpretations of *rasa* theory, with particular controversy around the issue of identification. In his article, ‘Rasa and taste’, Umberto Eco gives an overview of multiple commentators on *rasa* theory, following Bharata’s eminent Sanskrit treatise, the *Natyashastra*,² and its canonical interpretation by Abhinavagupta. According to Eco’s analysis, some modern interpreters of *rasa* theory ‘presuppos[e] [a] sort of complete emotional identification between actor and character and spectator and actor’, seeing parallels

between ‘the techniques of the actor described by Bharata [and] Stanislavsky’s method’ (2007: 12). Eco further connects this interpretation of *rasa* to a ‘homeopathic’ sense of Aristotelian catharsis, wherein ‘the spectator of a tragedy is genuinely seized by pity and terror, even to the point of paroxysm, so that in suffering these two passions he is purged of them, and emerges liberated by the tragic experience’ (2007: 12). Other interpretations of *rasa* such as by Raniero Gnoli and Pravas Jivan Chaudhury seem closer to an ‘allopathic’ sense of catharsis, wherein ‘the tragic text places us [the audience] at a distance from the passion that is represented, and we are liberated from passions not by experiencing them, but by appreciating the way in which they are represented’ (Eco 2007: 12). Writers such as Uttara Coorlawala emphasize that emotional distance and aesthetic stylization are crucial for producing *rasa*, seeing parallels between the techniques of *rasa* and Brecht’s alienation effect (2002: 63; Eco 2007: 12).

While there is disagreement regarding whether one should identify with the emotional content of the narrative, in all cases, the goal of a performance seems to be about going beyond personal identity, rather than establishing an identity. This seems to bear similar traits to identification as Diana Fuss articulates it in her book, *Identification Papers* (1995). Fuss writes that ‘identification is a process that keeps identity at a distance, that prevents identity from ever approximating the status of an ontological given, even as it makes possible the formation of an *illusion* of identity as immediate, secure, totalizable’ (1995: 2). In fact, one of the central claims of her book is that ‘it is precisely identity that becomes problematic in and through the work of identification’ (Fuss 1995: 2). This overlap between psychoanalytic concepts of identification and an allopathic sense of *rasa* suggests an area where the crossovers and differences between autobiographical performance and *abhinaya* could be discussed.

Autobiographical performance

In contrast to *rasa*’s emphasis on transcending the self, Deirdre Heddon describes autobiographical performance as ‘performance[s] of possibility’ that offer ‘a way to bring into being a self’ (2008: 2, 3). Grounded in the second wave feminist movement’s belief that the personal is political, the political potential of autobiographical performance rests in marginalized subjects’ ability to ‘reveal otherwise invisible lives, to resist marginalisation and objectification and to become, instead, speaking subjects with self-agency’ (Heddon 2008: 2). The two works we discuss in this essay, *Ramble-Ations* and *SUNOH! Tell Me, Sister*, contain both autobiographical and non-autobiographical content. They give voice to the stories of people ‘hailed by more than one minority identity component’ (Esteban Munoz 1999: 8). In addition to performing queerness, both were created in the context of South Asian diasporic cultural production in Los Angeles.

Autobiographical performance has been noted as an important strategy in both queer performance and Asian diasporic theatre, enabling ‘self-representation’, ‘revisionist history’ (Hughes in Hughes and Roman 1998: 4), ‘collective memory’ (Kondo 1997: 190), and an assertion of a ‘coalitional identity’ (Chatterjee 2005: 77). Part of its power is the palpable

immediacy of hearing a life-story straight from the horse's mouth; this direct and 'intimate mode of address' (Heddon 2008: 9) removes 'some level of safety' for the audience (Hughes in Hughes and Roman 1998: 4), 'interpolat[ing] us as "listeners"' (Heddon 2008: 59). Ideally, this act of bearing witness to the marginalized subject's story creates a sense of *communitas* between performer and audience, formed through shared identity and sympathetic alliances.

Insider audiences

Paradigmatically, both the communities targeted by identity-based autobiographical performance and the ideal viewer, or *rasika*, of *abhinaya* are insider audiences. As such, there are potential exclusions and limitations to the political efficacy of these two genres. The audiences for identity-based, autobiographical performances are often filled with 'already converted' (Kader 1990: 43) people whose identities and life experiences are similar to the performer, while, particularly in the diaspora, the cultural knowledge needed to 'read' *abhinaya* makes it in some sense 'identity-based'.³ Identity-based performance privileging shared experience can run the risk of treating '[e]xperience [as an] anti-solidarity machine', 'a conservative tool' that 'affords a person or a group empowerment at the cost of leaving all those who do not share that experience, outside – with no role to play' (Mathew 2003).

Classically, however, the insider status of the ideal *rasika* is not predicated on shared experience but on refined artistic knowledge. The *rasika* is conceived of as a sympathetic spectator (*sahrudaya*), a connoisseur who actively partakes in the performance and is 'ideally disposed for reception of the piece and the tasting of *rasa*, [or] aesthetic flavor' (Chatterjee 2011). As such, the emotionally invested reciprocal gaze between performer and *rasika* contrasts with the 'traditional' western gaze, which Ann Cooper Albright describes as a "'consuming" gaze' that 'sit[s] back' to be entertained and eschews involvement (1997: xxii); this consuming gaze is caught up in market ideology and patriarchal visual objectification of the (dancing) female body.

Nevertheless, the emphasis on insider cultural knowledge in this classical interpretation of *rasa* does not allow for production of *rasa* (or solidarity) across cultural difference. In addition, the *rasika*'s 'presumed level of knowledge has [potential] class implications' (Chatterjee 2011). Moreover, *rasa* theory's emphasis on de-personalization, anti-realism and achieving transcendence on a 'higher' spiritual plane seems incongruous with political action.

We move on now to a reading of D'Lo's *Ramble-Ations* and 'Ranri (widow/courtesan)', a section from the Post *Natyam* Collective's *SUNOH! Tell Me, Sister*. Both of these interdisciplinary performances function in the context of *natya*, which is described as a "'total" art form that unite[s] plot, acting, dance, poetry, music, architecture, fine arts, human values, and practically all other concerns of life in order to sustain and nourish an "otherworldly" emotional enjoyment (*rasa*)' (Visuvalingam 2005: 3). The tactical combination of autobiography and *abhinaya*-like techniques in these two works reconfigures solidarity and *rasa*, expanding them from their most conservative forms.

Ramble-Ations

In *Ramble-Ations*, D'Lo performs a panoply of characters of diverse gender and cultural locations, including himself, most of whom are imaginatively translated from his own life.⁴ The work shines a light on his experience of being marginalized by his gender presentation and sexuality, clearly resonating with Heddon's theorization of autobiographical performance as stemming from second wave feminism's impulse to become a 'speaking subject' by voicing one's invisible, marginalized life (2008: 3). While D'Lo's extensive use of autobiographical material in *Ramble-Ations* contradicts Indian *abhinaya*'s traditional emphasis on 'familiar characters of mythological status', his strategy of embodying multiple characters resonates with the techniques of *abhinaya* (Coorlawala 2002: 62). A solo *abhinaya* performer often performs 'plural subject positions', embodying 'both subject and object positions', with 'gender... performed as a location rather than a visible bodily given' (Coorlawala 2002: 63). D'Lo marks these character shifts through changes in physical carriage, voice and costume, corresponding roughly to the classical categories of *angika* (body), *vachika* (speech and text) and *aharya* (costume, make-up, set) *abhinaya* set forth in the *Natyashastra* (Chatterjee 2011). *Ramble-Ations*' characters hail from varied gender, age, class and ethnic backgrounds. Though adopted from D'Lo's life, many of them are familiar characters for the South Asian diaspora (immigrant mother, Gandhi, etc.). Rather than privilege the first person, D'Lo's life story is largely told from their perspectives, with D'Lo appearing as himself in the role of the 'tour guide', a position similar to the narrator of classical *abhinaya*.

Ramble-Ations begins as D'Lo strides onstage with an energetic bounce, wearing baggy baseball shorts, a zipped-up white athletic jacket, small hoops in each ear, and sneakers. Head shaved, brown-skinned, he speaks with a warm brashness pitched slightly higher than a typical male, expelling phrases with assurance and a spoken word cadence. He introduces himself in the first person and hails the audience into his identity-world: 'This [your ticket] allows you to be honorary gay, honorary Sri Lankan, and honorary vegetarian [read: Hindu]' (D'Lo 2008). As he speaks about his homeland, Sri Lanka, and its marginalized place within South Asia, his speech is embedded in hip hop vernacular, peppered with colloquialisms such as 'big ups', 'wack' and 'mad good'. D'Lo engages his audience using the 'Afrocentric' 'dialogical speechform' of 'call-and-response' (Kim 2007: 162). Comfortably and unmistakably masculine, he covers the stage space freely, an unpredictable rhythm in his knees and feet, punctuating his thoughts with hip hop gestures and the occasional ringing of a bell used in Hindu worship. He ends this remarkable performance of his intersectional, masculine, Sri Lankan, American, hip hop, Hindu and queer identity by interpellating the audience, establishing a solidarity predicated not on common identity but on the shared struggle of embodying hyphenated, split identities: 'We're split. Not here nor there, you've heard the story, if you're here tonight, you probably live it ...' (D'Lo 2008).

Shortly after D'Lo exits, he reappears in drag as his immigrant mother, Amma. Neatly wrapped in a modest red sari that emphasizes her rounded breasts and the flare of her hips, Amma wears South Asian style gold jewellery and has a long, black, well-oiled braid of hair. She speaks English clearly in a slightly high-pitched, Tamil accent. Amma tells the audience about her beloved daughter, D'Lo, expressing a rather charming bewilderment about her daughter's sexuality and masculinity: 'At first it was all a shock to me. We don't have the gays in Sri Lanka' (D'Lo [2006] 2011). Amma associates homosexuality with whiteness, saying, 'I know what a gay looks like, I watch the TV. You know Ellen Degeneres, Rosie O'Donell, that tennis player Martina Nava ... Nava ... Martina Navabalachandran. You see, all these are white people. And my daughter is not even fair skinned' (D'Lo [2006] 2011). Throughout, Amma's legs and arms stay demurely close to the centre of her body. She spends most of the scene sitting, modestly adjusting the *pallu* of her sari to maintain a proper appearance, and walking to the altar to pick up a Hindu idol or item of worship, which she polishes carefully with a handkerchief. As such, she is an image of ideal South Asian Hindu femininity: chaste, devout and motherly. She ends saying, 'I realized that all this is my karma ... I may not understand this gay business ... But she is my daughter, and I must love her'.

The scene ends with the performer unwinding out of the sari as the lights fade, a Brechtian manoeuvre that denaturalizes gender, highlighting how D'Lo disidentifies⁵ with an idealized Hindu femininity by impersonating, with humour and humanity, his mother. As Gayatri Gopinath writes in *Impossible Desires*, her analysis of queer South Asian diasporic culture, while analyzing Shyam Selvadurai's 1994 novel, *Funny Boy*:

[A] performance of queer femininity radically reconfigures hegemonic nationalist and diasporic logic, which depends on the figure of the woman as a stable signifier of 'tradition.' Within a queer diasporic imaginary, the lost homeland is represented not by the pure, self sacrificing wife and mother but rather a queer boy in a sari.

(2005: 174)

D'Lo's performance of queer femininity is further complicated by the fact that he is a transgender rather than cisgender man. The audience's pleasure in his artful female impersonation, in drag's ironic subversion of gender roles, is haunted by the awareness that society intended for D'Lo to embody this sari-clad image of Hindu femininity in daily life, that Amma is the woman he never grew up to become.

As the piece progresses, D'Lo takes on a dizzying array of different characters, shifting his physicality (*angika abhinaya*), voice (*vachika abhinaya*) and costume (*aharya abhinaya*) accordingly. We meet Vanathi Vivekanda Moorthy, a slightly air-headed valley girl with fashionably layered long hair, whose high feminine voice trembles with tears (*vachika abhinaya*), as she stands demurely with her legs together (*angika abhinaya*) in a narrow skirt and silver high heels (*aharya abhinaya*). Later we meet Gandhi G., who looks suspiciously like

Mahatma Gandhi with his bald head, grey moustache and round glasses. Wearing a white dhoti and shawl (*aharya abhinaya*), he speaks with a raspy South Asian accent (*vachika abhinaya*) and hobbles creakily with a cane, swearing and taking swigs from a flask (*angika abhinaya*). The show also includes White Eagle, a female African American ‘healer’, and Nic, a stud and theatre janitor who composes hip hop love poetry. These characters shed light on D’Lo through their perspectives, undermining autobiography’s traditional focus on the first person ‘I’ and illustrating Fuss’s theory that ‘the detour through the other ... defines the self’ (Fuss 1995: 2).

The power of autobiography and *rasa* are mobilized together during a key emotional moment in *Ramble-Actions* when D’Lo, addressing the audience as himself, reinvents the Hindu ritual of *arathi*. He unveils, complicates and honours his transgender body through an intimate, vulnerable act of undressing and binding his upper body. Ringing a bell used in Hindu worship, he prostrates deeply to the audience, then stands and says:

I got this stage [arms gesture downward in a V] ... and I got you [left arm lifting to reference the audience]

And I revere this [arms gesturing in circles between his center and the audience] like I revere any woman,

Lover Mother Sister Friend [hands slowly rise upwards]

Cuz this stage holds me up [hands above head, as if holding something heavy] like only a woman can.

(D’Lo [2006] 2011)

The vulnerable act of undressing, particularly loaded for a transgender person,⁶ and D’Lo’s direct address to the audience create a performer–audience intimacy characteristic of the autobiographical pact. Reverently referring to the reciprocal exchange between performer and audience in a way that resonates with *rasa* theory, D’Lo locates the stage as both sacred and queer space, a place of performative possibility that supports him ‘like only a woman can’.

‘Ranri (widow/courtesan)’

‘Ranri (widow/courtesan)’ is a duet section from the Post *Natyam* Collective’s evening-length piece, *SUNOH! Tell Me, Sister*, which combines autobiographical performance, verbatim theatre and the performance of history, drawing on ‘(1) the histories of India’s dancer-courtesan, (2) community work with domestic violence survivors, and (3) the performers’ personal struggles with tradition’ (Lee 2011). As in *Ramble-Actions*, the performers employ *abhinaya*’s technique of embodying multiple characters from varied gendered, cultural and historical locations, including themselves. The autobiographical components of the larger show serve in part to establish a self-reflexive, critical stance towards Indian dance tradition, questioning the dance-forms’ choreographies of gender (as in Cynthia Ling Lee’s ‘Learning to walk like Radha’) or its

disconnection from the lived political realities of contemporary women (as in Shyamala Moorty's 'I see, but ...'). The performers, who have significant training in different Indian classical dance forms, disidentify with the performance of idealized Hindu femininity that is shared by the various styles they practice. They challenge the nationalist and diasporic identity constructions of Indian classical dance by appropriating and translating canonical *abhinaya* techniques to imagine erotic, queer alternatives.

Throughout 'Ranri (widow/courtesan)' the relationship between the two women performers keeps shifting and thus remains ambiguous to the audience. Cynthia traces, in chronological fashion, the life-story of Rasulanbai, a child widow who escapes her abusive in-laws by becoming a courtesan. The character of Rasulanbai is loosely inspired by an historical but little known person documented in Veena Oldenburg's fieldwork on courtesan communities in Lucknow, North India, in the 1970s. Shyamala, on the other hand, changes roles and shifts between time periods throughout the piece, enacting the child bride's mother, herself as contemporary dancer and potentially the courtesan's lover.

About midway through the piece, Shyamala, playing herself, has a conversation with Rasulanbai, the courtesan. Shyamala kneels in front of a large semi-transparent scrim facing the audience, while Rasulanbai, wrapped in a sari with her head covered, stands behind the scrim on an upstage right diagonal.

'So, Rasulanbai ...' – asks Shyamala – it seems as if they are in mid-conversation – '... then you ran away to become a courtesan?'

Rasulanbai: 'Tell me, sister, what would you have done if [smacks fist in hand] everyday?' (Lee and Moorty 2011). The courtesan responds to the questions in a patient, dignified voice, while taking the sari off her head.

The dialogue that unfolds from here walks a fine line between acknowledging and romanticizing the possible power of the courtesan, who can supposedly make a viewer 'fall in love with [her]' 'just with the lift of an eyebrow' (Lee and Moorty 2011). However, unlike a 'conventional diasporic [nostalgic] discourse' (Gopinath 2005: 4), this exchange enters a queer diasporic discourse:

If conventional diasporic discourse is marked by this backward glance, this 'overwhelming nostalgia for lost origins, for "times past"' a queer diaspora mobilizes questions of the past, memory, and nostalgia for radically different purposes. Rather than evoking an imaginary homeland frozen in an idyllic moment outside history what is remembered through queer diasporic desire and the queer diasporic body is a past time and place riven with contradictions and the violences of multiple uprootings, displacements and exiles.

(Gopinath 2005: 4; Hall 2006)

In this moment, Shyamala confronts her dance's history by questioning her artistic ancestor, the courtesan who was central for the development of (erotic) *abhinaya*. She asks Rasulanbai, 'But all your poetry is about love and heartbreak and yearning. Is it all fake, or do you have real love in your life?' The courtesan declares, 'We have love. But love isn't for the public; love isn't for one's patron. Love? We keep that between ourselves' (Lee and Moorty 2011).

The almost-romanticizing verbal exchange morphs into a romantic, that is, erotic, physical exchange. The contemporary dancer now turns to face Rasulanbai, sitting on a diagonal with her back to the audience. Gently, the sound of a tabla enters, initially with electronic elements, which disappear and transition into a *thumri*, a light classical North Indian song-form associated with femininity, love and courtesan culture (Du Perron 2002).

Rasulanbai slowly takes off her sari in a luxurious, sensual motion. The contemporary dancer watches her, reaches towards the scrim with her right hand, gets up slightly, lifts her hands and traces the form of the courtesan with both hands in *hamsasya hasta*, from top down, while Rasulanbai melts to the ground and turns around. She sits in an open, elegant pose reminiscent of courtesan images. The contemporary dancer in front of the scrim sits on her left heel, right leg slightly pulled up. Her body language has transformed from casual to mirroring the Indian 'classical' poise of the courtesan.

The two women begin to dance with each other, separated by the sheer scrim. Though this is an *abhinaya* duet, the faces of the dancers are not clearly seen. The facial expression, for which *abhinaya* is often a shorthand, has to be imagined. The bodies and hands tell of a story unfolding between the women. The women are not engaging the gaze of the audience but looking at each other.

Rasulanbai lifts her arm in an elegant gesture and gently, brings it down in a waving motion, as if tracing something, while the contemporary dancer watches the hand, mirrors its paths in her body and sensually reacts to the motion in her own body. The courtesan now plucks flowers, and the contemporary dancer accentuates each plucking movement from her sternum, ending with a circular motion of her full upper body, her hands circling her breasts, parallel to the circling motion of the courtesan's hands, indicating a beautiful flower. The motion ends with both of them tracing paths, reaching towards each other, getting up onto their knees, almost meeting.

At one moment they seem to be in dialogue with each other, mirroring, then engaged in a sensual exchange. At other points they seem to be on internal, parallel erotic journeys that may or may not intersect. Shyamala's character is ambiguous here: is she now the courtesan's lover, or her transhistorical student, mirroring her guru's movements in order to learn the form of *abhinaya* (Lee 2006)? Does she copy, or does she react sensually to an imagined touch of her lover? Does she act, or does she receive pleasure? Does she identify with the courtesan or desire her – or both? Do *viraha bhava* (longing/lost love) and psychoanalytic identification's desire for a lost love object (Fuss 1995) intersect? And how might Shyamala's desire and longing for the

courtesan destabilize her sense of self and ‘keep [her personal] identity at a distance’ (Fuss 1995: 2)?

Conclusion: Politicizing the *rasika* – translations for an activist context

Both D’Lo’s *Ramble-Ations* and Post *Natyam* Collective’s ‘Ranri (widow/courtesan)’ tactically intersect the techniques of autobiography and *abhinaya* in their performance of queerness. In so doing, they embrace and disidentify with these two genres, testing and extending their limits.

D’Lo expands identity-based autobiographical performance beyond a performance of the self, embodying multiple characters of diverse genders and cultural locations in a way resonant with *abhinaya* technique. He also expands solidarity from its most conservative form, where ‘narrative closure’ ‘prevents solidarity beyond a particular, narrowly defined community’ (Chatterjee 2005: 308). Instead of asking the audience to identify with his story based on shared experience, he interpellates his audience as allies sympathetic to his cause of freedom when he says: ‘This [your ticket] allows you to be honorary gay, honorary Sri Lankan, and honorary vegetarian [read: Hindu]’ (D’Lo 2008). By buying the ticket and coming to witness the show, the audience has entered the story of his life as honorary members.

Post *Natyam* Collective members Cynthia Ling Lee and Shyamala Moorty, on the other hand, use an autobiographical stance to create critical distance from Indian dance tradition, a ‘queer diasporic’ stance that mobilizes questions and reveals contradictions about the past (Gopinath 2005: 4). They not only render the defamed and disinherited ancestor of their dance, the courtesan, visible, they disidentify with *abhinaya* in its de-eroticized classical form, using its techniques to translate *sringara rasa* (the *rasa* of love) into an erotic, desiring relationship between two women. They restage an impossible kinaesthetic connection: impossible because it bridges the past and the present and impossible because it stages an impossible subject in Gopinath’s terms, namely, a female, queer, diasporic subject.

In light of these tactical intersections, we would like to end with a choreo-theoretical move: a political appropriation or ‘queering’ of the *rasika* and *rasa* theory. Instead of the *rasika* as high-class connoisseur, we reconfigure the *rasika* as an ‘ally’ ‘who is willing to embark on the journey of the performance together with the performer’ but ‘not necessarily someone who has “deep” insider knowledge’ (Chatterjee 2011). As a political ally, the *rasika* may be sympathetic without being ‘steeped in the intricacies of the art-form’ or directly identifying with the protagonist/performer (Lee 2006). The *rasika*-as-ally ‘would be a viewer of “radical” “openness,” a viewer who, rather than seeing her or his own reflection in an unfamiliar performance, has “the capacity to [see] that which [she or he] does not already understand”’ (Lee 2006: 21–22, quoting Dipesh Chakrabarty), to be ‘moved by what does not belong to [her or him]’ (Sara Ahmed, as quoted by Heddon 2008: 153). Politicizing the *rasika* potentially informs ‘an *anti-identitarian identity politics* in which commonality is not forged through shared images

and fixed identifications but fashioned instead from connotative images that invoke communal structures of feeling' (Esteban Munoz 1999: 176, original emphasis).

If the politically re-appropriated *rasika* becomes an ally, then the spiritual transcendence of classical *rasa* can be translated to – or tactically misrecognized as – political emancipation. Christine Garlough describes how South Asian activist diasporic performances 'employ[] sentiment and relationality to evoke emotion and a sense of emancipation' (2013: 12). A politically

re-appropriated *rasa* would, to recontextualize David Halperin's words, entail 'cultivat[ing] that part of oneself that leads beyond oneself, that transcends oneself'; as Jose Esteban Munoz states, '[t]his moment of transcendence is the moment in which counterpublics become imaginable; it is a moment brimming with the possibility of transformative politics' (1999: 178, 179).

Notes

1. Originally an anti-gay epithet, the term 'queer' was reclaimed by Queer Nation and ACT UP! AIDS activists in New York in the early 1990s.
2. The *Natyashastra* is estimated to have been written sometime between 200 bc and 200 ad by Bharata, or compiled by multiple authors. Sometimes it is dated as early as the 6th century bc (Schechner 2001: 28).
3. We make this argument regarding *abhinaya* for the particular context of the South Asian diaspora in the United States, where South Asian performing arts practices can be seen as a way of learning and reproducing 'Indianness'. For a more detailed discussion, see Chatterjee (2005: 43–44) and Katrak (2004: 80).
4. Throughout the article we refer to D'Lo using 'he', following his current preference for the masculine pronoun. However, in 2008, when the video of *Ramble-ations* that we reference during our analysis was recorded, many people still referred to D'Lo as 'she'. D'Lo has performed *Ramble-Ations* post-transition.
5. Drawing on Althusser's theory of interpellation, Jose Esteban Munoz conceptualizes 'disidentification [as] a remaking and rewriting of a dominant script', distinct from identification (adhering to dominant ideology) and counter-identification (directly opposing dominant ideology) (1999: 23, 11).
6. D'Lo has had top surgery since this performance, bringing further complexity to this performative moment.

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