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Hosting the re-appearance of Nyota Inyoka. An anatomy of the white gaze

Amanda Piña

The following are observations on the artistic work of French PoC choreographer Nyota Inyoka (1896–1971). They have been written with a direct involvement in processes of becoming her dancing body. They come from the experience of a dancer and choreographer of color.

By hosting the re-appearance of Nyota Inyoka's dances in my body, by observation and research on her material and immaterial legacy, I have come to the conclusion that the concepts of "representation" and "composition" fail to describe her practice. My argument is that it is not possible to understand creole, mestiza[1] or chi'ixi[2] forms of art within monolithic white, modern / colonial ontologies. To do so would only mean to reproduce a persistent form of epistemic violence present in modernity / coloniality [Quijano 2000] and in European dance history. I will call this form of violence the "white gaze" and will deepen on that in the following lines. My purpose is a decolonial practical inquiry, proposing the re-union of thinking, feeling, sensing, and acting in re-visiting Inyoka's choreographic work.

One hundred years have passed since Nyota Inyoka became a figure in the European dance scene. The institutional framings for the modern arts at the time worked by reproducing the othering schemes of coloniality. Depending on those framings one could be either an artist who exhibits or be the one exhibited at the "human zoos" of the time. The works of artists (white and male) were being featured at the modern art exhibitions of the time while BIPOC artists — queer or female, "new" or second generation Europeans — were featured at the international colonial exhibitions, where the term "exhibit" gained quite other connotations in the colonial metropolises.

At the core of this divergence in framings, the operating colonial notions of race, gender, and class determined the working possibilities for women-artists of color available at the time. The discourses available through which women of color could express their approach to art were permeated by exoticism and existing within whiteness.

An anatomy of the white gaze

Whiteness as a concept has emerged and is becoming popular recently. At the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century, with the coming of age of decolonial discourses, theories and practices originated in the Americas and in the diaspora (especially the ones developed by Latin American and Caribbean scholars), and after the Black Lives Matter movement, we can finally talk critically about whiteness within European art circles. Still, white studies remain an almost uncharted territory of inquiry within European critical theory and the arts.

The white gaze I talk about, to, and with is not-only the one described by writers like Toni Morrison, which is similar to the white male gaze in cinema and media understood as a point of view and framing that renders female sexualization in terms of gender, or racialization in terms of othering. I propose the white gaze as an ideology of superiority, in many cases as a not informed, not reflected and much less self-reflected category of looking within a modern-colonial ontology of art.

How does this gaze operate? Is it individual? collective? private? public? institutional? curatorial? Is it present in this reading? In this text? In you and me? Does it exist per default? And if yes, in which way is it co-constitutive (and not-only) of the artistic works of BIPOC artists in the time between the wars in Europe and today?

As you might have noticed I used the term “not-only” twice. I borrow this term from Peruvian anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena [de la Cadena 2015] because I find it very helpful in bridging the complexity of what is beyond but also within Western ontologies and languages. Assuming that modernity / coloniality is not only outside but present and active in our bodies, thoughts, and feelings as a structure of power and epistemic domination — as what Gloria Wekker in her *White Innocence* [Wekker 2016] calls a cultural archive.

White gaze, then, is a form of seeing unaware of its ontological constructions, a form of representation that renders invisible the representational activity of the one who represents — an oculo-centric image-based form of enacting the world. A lot has been written about the modern gaze by decolonial scholars. In his book *La Hybris del Punto Cero*, Castro-Gómez [Castro-Gómez 2005] thinks of the ways of knowing of modernity / coloniality as point zero perspective, a point zero of enunciation, from which the representational activity of the one representing is rendered invisible.

Decolonial scholar Rolando Vázquez [Vázquez 2020] draws a relation between the Eiffel tower and modernity, proposing the tower as an optical device, one which can perform the reduction of the world to an image:

“La Tour becomes a site to investigate how modernity’s power of representing the real becomes the power of producing a world as representation. [...] As an unsuspected optical instrument, La Tour performs the reduction of the world to an image and brings it into the hold of representation. [...] The gaze of western metaphysics, the gaze of science and technology, becomes through this scopic architectural apparatus. In offering the experience of the world as representation, La Tour is the site for becoming spectator.” [Vázquez 2020: 25–26]

When did the image become an essential element of the gaze? The history of the modern gaze is the history of technologies of representation. The birth of perspectival representation in the European Renaissance created a facsimile of the viewpoint as it appears from an observer’s standpoint. It places an eye in front of an object, naturalizing the subject–object world–view of western modernity. As the elevated viewpoint from the tip of the Eiffel tower, perspective developed as a universalizing way of looking as a subject qua spectator into a world of represented objects. The white gaze presents itself as an image viewed from a point zero perspective of western thought / modernity / coloniality, through which hierarchies of thought are built, within categories such as truth (science) and superiority (race).

The white gaze here would be proposed as an ideology of superiority but also as an idea of what it is to see and what is actually seen. A one world perspective of western modern–coloniality; the ontological site of the spectator of representation; a reducing of other worlds of meaning and the bodies of others to images for consumption.

Hosting the re–appearance of ancestral forms of movement

Nyota Inyoka worked within European modern dance and with methods other, or *not-only* western. Her live performances hosted the re–appearance of ancestral deities. This re–appearance implied a form of relation that went beyond formal dance making as the construction of a form, an object for the senses (western aesthetics) and beyond the modern notion of image as representation (white gaze).

When hosting the re–appearance of her dances in my body I understand that a much more somatic approach is needed in order to allow those dances to take body, a practice approach that relates less to composition than to Indian philosophies of practice.

Inyoka’s solo dances can be understood as embodiments of content and form, energetic qualities and states of the body of the deity which can be understood better through spiritual tantric traditions present in Hinduism and Buddhism. Tantras (“doctrine” or “framework” or “system”[3]) refer to numerous and varied Scriptures pertaining to esoteric traditions rooted in Hindu and Buddhist philosophy such as Vajrayāna.[4] The religious culture of the Tantras, then, is essentially Hindu, and Buddhist Tantric material can be shown to have been derived from Hindu sources

[Flood 1996: 158]. In these tantric spiritual practices (I am myself familiar with tantric Buddhist practices), embodiment is understood as the absorption of the Deity's qualities, through identification and imitation, in a process that includes reproducing the particular postures of the deity, its facial expression and also visualizing one's fusion with it as a form of awareness or consciousness. This understanding of embodiment relates to the notion of Compossession[5] in the sense that exceeds western rational and scientific epistemic framings.

Compossession combines "composition" and "possession" and refers to forms of different knowledges beyond a 'western' conception; compossession integrates practices from Caribbean, creole and indigenous traditions. As an alternative to the notion of composition, compossession operates in decolonial terms beyond the notions of time, space, subject, object as proposed by "the contemporary" in its continuation of modernity / coloniality.

In her persistent, one could say life-long embodiments of the Hindu God Shiva, Nyota Inyoka compossesses her dances through a tantric-like practice. Was she acquainted with Tantric practices such as Vajrayāna? Was she familiar with Alexandra David-Néel's writings on her travels in Tibet, where Vajrayāna practices had flourished and developed? The implicit form of knowing of dance and embodiment already based on imitation rather than distant observation can be understood as an epistemic context in which to become that what is being known through dancing. To become is a radically different practice than to perform make-belief or craft for others to see. To compose an image as an object of the senses is a different process than working on the senses through mimesis. This practice of becoming the deity can be described as a practice of trans-substantiation. By acquiring the qualities of the deity one becomes not only human and not only dancing for others (audience), beyond representation as whiteness. The re-appearance of the deity has its own agency, its own tendencies, its own dances. It becomes a practice of exiting the racializing schemes of the white gaze from within, by involving the wholeness of our body mind in the process of becoming.

To host the re-appearance of ancestral forms of movement implies a passive rather than active role, one must invite (call or invoke), host and care for the guest (a ghost or spectre). Dance in this sense is better understood as a subject and not as an object. In this process of hosting, one's intentionality must remain low in order for a certain experience, awareness, state of mind and body to take possession of us. It is a practice of listening rather than talking. To allow that process is an art, the art of Compossession, in which allowing the re-appearance of ancestral forms of movement means to become the writing (graphos), instead of being the one who writes. The ancestrality of the guest, a multiplicity of bodies implied in this case in the figure of Shiva, including yours dancing it now, becomes the dance (choros), dancing in unison with ancestral entities, through the time of precedence[6].

A double appearance

By means of compossession I invited Nyota Inyoka's Shiva to re-appear in my body. The compossessed experience is one in which dancing and experiencing the dance are equally important. The dance experience as an image is also present but not only. In compossession one becomes less important than the entity one is hosting. While hosting the re-appearance of Shiva as danced by Nyota Inyoka I can feel the energy of the deity, and also the exotified presence of the choreographer.

The exotic can be thought of from many different perspectives, as a problem in the eye of the ones who see (white gaze), as the incapability of dealing with otherness which turns difference into a fetish for consumption. When embodied purposely, as a realm of possibility beyond the norm, in this case the western canon of dance and its implied coloniality [Haitzinger 2019], the exotic can be there as a possibility of embodying the Exo, what is outside somewhere else. Through shape-shifting, identity speculation, glamour, creativity and dreaming, the exotic becomes also a fertile terrain for epistemic disobedience.

Nyota Inyoka's epistemic disobedience to the western forms of representation in the arts was rooted in the speculative perspective of the diaspora and of *créolité*. Her choreographic approach produced other worlds of meaning and sensing, which had to fit into the frames of modern / colonial theatre of the times, and were consumed within modern / colonial notions of authorship, audienceship, frontal perspective, spectacle, show representation and composition. Yet the principles of her work cannot be reduced to, or only understood within, the western understandings of those notions.

Creole, mestiza, and chi'ixi, before the time in which those concept-practices could flourish, existing in that in-betweenness, Nyota Inyoka creates an alternative Indian and European modern dance, inhabiting this third place of "border-dancing". A place that is not accessible solely from being on one or other side of colonial difference, on the inside or on the outside of a territory or an epistemic or ontological context, but in both. Her practice embraces divergence as a creative force for the emergence of other worlds of sensing and meaning, for other presences to re-appear — in-between worlds.

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[1] In her work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* [Anzaldúa 1987/2012] Chicano writer and poet Gloria Anzaldúa, proposes the figure of mestiza, a feminist queer alternative to the male mestizo identity. The mestizo is a subject fusion between indigenous and Spanish heritage. Anzaldúa's *The New Mestiza* is introduced as a multiversal identity made of that encounter but also existing at the border between worlds, in diaspora, writing and existing from the U.S. side of the border. As a Chicano figure, which complexifies identity, Gloria Anzaldúa's new mestiza reclaims indigenous heritage from a diasporic perspective.

[2] In her works *Un Mundo Chi'ixi es posible: Ensayos desde un presente en crisis* [Rivera Cusicanqui 2018] and *Chi'ixinakax Utxiwa. Una reflexión sobre prácticas y discursos descolonizadores* [Rivera Cusicanqui 2010] Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui proposes the Aymara term "Chi'ixi" as a metaphor for a new understanding of Andean identities. Ch'ixi is a mottled grey color formed from a multiplicity of dots or spots that are not necessarily contradictory colors. The resulting grey color is not produced through a fusion of both materials, but by their proximity within the dotted weaving pattern. It proposes an identity in which ontological divergence is not erased as in the concept of mestizaje.

[3] <https://hareesh.org/blog/2015/6/10/definition-of-the-word-tantra>, 28 November 2021.

[4] Vajrayāna (Sanskrit: "thunderbolt vehicle" or "diamond vehicle") along with Mantrayāna, Guhyamantrayāna, Tantrayāna, Tantric Buddhism and Esoteric Buddhism are names referring to Buddhist traditions associated with Tantra and "Secret Mantra", which developed in the medieval Indian subcontinent and spread to Tibet, East Asia, Mongolia and other Himalayan states. Vajrayāna practices are connected to specific lineages in Buddhism, through the teachings of lineage holders. Others might generally refer to texts as the Buddhist Tantras. It includes practices that make use of mantras, dharanis, mudras, mandalas and the visualization of deities and Buddhas. David Seyfort Ruegg has suggested that Buddhist tantra employed various elements of a "pan-Indian religious substrate" which is not specifically Buddhist as Shaiva or Vaishnava. Shaivism (/ˈʃaɪvɪzəm/; Sanskrit: शैवसम्प्रदायः, Śhaivasampradāyah) is one of the major Hindu traditions that worship Shiva. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vajrayana>, 16 February 2022.

[5] Compossession is a concept I have developed from my artistic and discursive practice over the last years; see Piña 2019.

[6] As the title of the project of which my research was a part, *Border-dancing across time*, implies, precedence can be understood as a practice of exiting the understanding of time as a line, so present in modernity / coloniality, which is to be found at the source of the notions of progress and development. Precedence is a time in which what is before is before us because it precedes us. See Vázquez 2017.