

Blended Ontologies: entanglements of yoga, martial arts and postmodern Indian dance

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Abstract:

Emerging out of New York in the second half of the twentieth century, the dancers who coined the term ‘post-modern’ for their creations shared a fragmentation that embraced plural perspectives with more theoretical understandings of postmodernism. This in turn enabled enormous innovation in dance technique, because any movement was now potentially ‘dance’, its composition rather than any intrinsic qualities classifying it as choreography, thus massively diversifying the range of embodied practices that found their way onto the stage. These investigations took on particular characteristics in South India, where influential choreographers sought to forge an explicitly Indian contemporary dance language, by dismantling what Chandralekha (1928-2006) famously termed the ‘dollification’ of classical Indian dance by deconstructing its ‘grammar’ to free it from its classical content and religious narratives. They did so in part by drawing on yoga and the South Indian martial art *kaḷariṣṣayarr* in the somatic dismantling and bricolage which is a hallmark of postmodern dance. This blending of forms, while on the one hand striking and powerfully effective, has also obscured the ontological and somatic distinctions between these practices of yoga and *kaḷariṣṣayarr*, in part because dance itself is often understood by its practitioners to be in some way soteriological. Focussing on Chandralekha’s final work, *Sharira*, and the training methods of Attakkalari Centre for Movement Arts in Bengaluru, this paper analyses this somatic and ontological overlaps between these forms and sheds light on the role of contemporary dance artists in contributing to the analysis, transmission and dissemination of both yoga and *kaḷariṣṣayarr* in India and beyond.

Biography:

Lucy May Constantini’s PhD in the School of Religious Studies at the Open University explores the relationship between practice and textual traditions in *kaḷariṣṣayarr*, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council’s Open-Oxford-Cambridge Doctoral Training Partnership. This interdisciplinary research encompasses ethnography and the study of manuscripts in Malayalam and Sanskrit. Her methodology is informed by her background as a dance artist, where her work has investigated the confluence of martial arts, yoga and postmodern dance as maker, performer, facilitator and teacher, in the UK and internationally. She has also been engaged with yoga, either as practitioner, teacher, or teacher trainer, for over three decades.

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