

**Rachmi Diyah Larasati. *The Dance That Makes You Vanish: Cultural Reconstruction in Post-Genocide Indonesia*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. 196 pp.**

**Toni Shapiro-Phim**

Anthropologist and scholar of Southeast Asia Sally Ann Ness has written about returning “bodily experience as a form of consciousness and understanding to a central place within” Western academic inquiry. Not to do so, especially in a case in which such embodied knowledge and practice “may be as central to the human experience of another culture as it is marginal to that of mainstream US society,” would, she argues, “deny the interpretive potential” of dance and other choreographic phenomena.<sup>1</sup> In *The Dance That Makes You Vanish*, Rachmi Diyah Larasati heeds Ness’s call, making visible the potency of Indonesian dance (mainly of court traditions), and the lives of its performers. Chronicling—and countering—erasure of the dance’s practitioners, she also illuminates possibilities in terms of mobility and identity negotiation that dancing for the state can offer female artists.

Larasati’s focus is the horrific violence of 1965–66 and its aftermath. She explicates—from both an academic and a personal perspective—the multifaceted relationship between female dancers and the Indonesian state as Suharto took control of the country and then ruled for another three decades. In addition to being a professor of dance, Larasati is a classical dancer, one who performed as a member of the Indonesian Cultural Mission, a state-sanctioned dance troupe. Weaving memoir, history, and theory into a poignant narrative, she paints a compelling picture of the complex interplay between performance and the politics of memory, making the case that “the reconstruction of [national history and memory] serves to erase the extreme violence and chaos on which Suharto’s New Order state itself was founded” (p. xxi). State officials accomplished this, in part, by, first, recognizing that aesthetic practices are efficacious means of both communicating and influencing identity, embodied experience, and memory; and, second, by manipulating those practices to their own ends.

Larasati delves into the New Order’s “massive societal re-categorization” (p. 5) that was coeval with the unchecked killings and arrests that followed the 1965 purported attempted coup d’état. She chronicles the impact on artists, in particular female artists, many of whom had been associated with organizations (e.g., Lekra [Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, Institute of People’s Culture], an artists’ guild; and Gerwani [Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, Indonesian Women’s Movement], what Larasati calls a “protofeminist” women’s group) that were all-of-a-sudden labeled under Suharto as “communist” and, therefore, evil. Forbidden to perform and assaulted, arrested, shunned by authorities and neighbors, and murdered or disappeared, these women’s traumatic displacement from the lives they had known was compounded by their ultimate replacement (hence, erasure) by state-sanctioned facsimiles. With the female

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Toni Shapiro-Phim is Director of Programs, Philadelphia Folklore Project, Philadelphia, PA, and a visiting lecturer at Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, PA.

<sup>1</sup> Sally Ann Ness, *Body, Movement and Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p. 239 (emphasis in original).

dancing body at the center of much of the public construction—both domestic and international—of what was to constitute Indonesian national culture, it was imperative to formulate, indeed, to create, a polished, idealized version of that body. And while Javanese court aesthetics were privileged by the government, “hold[ing] sway over the nation’s diverse groups through hegemonic over-representation,” (p. 93) Larasati adds that minority practices had been appropriated as well. “[T]o erase, exclude, or eliminate the historical bodies who once performed certain cultural practices—rhetorically positioning them as originals to be replaced by eternalist state cultural discourse and its dancing replicas—is at the minimum a serious abuse of human rights. At worst, such actions constitute politicized mass murder, or genocide” (p. 101).

In a book of chilling revelations and haunting analysis, stories of the practice of *wajib lapor* (“duty to report”), the New Order’s instrument for political rehabilitation of those deemed in need of such, are particularly arresting. Reporting weekly to local village or army officers, as required, some widows, or wives of men who had disappeared, were repeatedly raped. They had no recourse. In Bali, it was sometimes the same men who violated those “reporting” who also ritually processed offerings made by other local women—those not tainted with traitorous associations—for rites meant to bless and cleanse, and bring about harmony.

Indonesia was not unique in its twentieth-century quest to represent itself as a nation-state through the foregrounding of dance and other aspects of cultural practice and heritage. In Cambodia, which Larasati uses as a comparative case, royal, republican, and communist regimes have made Khmer classical dance a high-profile state priority. Long intertwined with spirituality, cycles of nature, and royalty—functioning as a bridge between earth and the heavens, a celebration (or protector) of seasonal change, a guarantor of fertility, and a buttress of a monarch’s legitimacy—dance of the court tradition became a central tenet of Norodom Sihanouk’s nation-building project, garnering its place as a symbol of the nation itself. To represent the state affords one opportunity, limits, and, sometimes, pain. For both Cambodian and Indonesian dancers, the presence of absence remains profound.

Beyond Southeast Asia, as well, dance’s aesthetic, spiritual, and political weight have been harnessed to control a master national narrative, and to oppress. Following the orders of President Mobutu Sese Seko (1965–97), people in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), for example, were forced on a daily basis to participate in public dance events honoring the president, his family, and his ancestral home, or for particular political initiatives. Dance became a tool of nationalist ideology and, in some instances, humiliation. Those who didn’t participate, or didn’t participate enthusiastically enough, were punished severely. Further, according to historian Joan Huckstep, “As one informant stated, ‘It was really like being raped. I wept when I saw my father being forced to dance on the podium ...’ His outrage went beyond observing his father forcibly dancing, embodying an ideology and political praxis with which he fundamentally and morally disagreed. In [their local] tradition, given his social status, his father would not have danced publicly for others; others would have danced for his father.”<sup>2</sup> Conversely, those employed by the state as official performers, having, in part, appropriated sacred movement motifs of various ethnic groups, in effect erased

<sup>2</sup> Joan Huckstep, “Animation Politique,” in *Dance, Human Rights, and Social Justice: Dignity in Motion*, ed. Naomi Jackson and Toni Shapiro-Phim (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), p. 62.

the histories of noted ancestors and elders referenced through gesture, chant, and song. They replaced those allusions or actual names with indications of Mobutu.

*The Dance That Makes You Vanish* was published shortly after the release of the documentary film *The Act of Killing*.<sup>3</sup> Disconcerting and riveting, *Killing* features actual self-proclaimed Indonesian gangsters as they describe, re-enact, and contemplate the murders they perpetrated of “communists” in 1965–66. They note that the world will now know that “we lied about the communists being cruel ... We were cruel.” They also mention the government propaganda movie about the events of 1965, the film Larasati references as one she and all Indonesian school children had to watch each year as a lesson in national history. “That’s a lie,” one gangster says to another, about its depiction of “communist women dancing naked ... It was easy to make them look bad” in a movie, after the fact. Both *The Act of Killing* and *Vanish*, appearing nearly fifty years after this infamous moment in Indonesian history, illuminate much that had been intentionally masked, misrepresented, or wiped from the historical record. And both reveal the insidious nature of the legacy of the violence and repression, a legacy (in which the Western academy can be seen as complicit, Larasati argues) manifested in everything from obliviousness to on-going concealment, discrimination, fear, and, for many, impunity.

Larasati joins a number of scholars from across the globe examining performance (theater, music, and, of course, dance) in relation to violence, war, politics, human rights, and social justice concerns.<sup>4</sup> Hers, encompassing local, national, and international implications of the positioning of dance and the female dancer—including discussions of female agency—is a superb addition to the literature, crafted with rigor and generosity. She shares her (at times harrowing) personal journey as student, performer, and civil servant, and as researcher, growing into critical self-knowledge from abroad.

<sup>3</sup> Joshua Oppenheimer, dir., *The Act of Killing*, Final Cut for Real and DK, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Recent examples include: Jackson and Shapiro-Phim, eds., *Dance, Human Rights and Social Justice*; John Morgan O’Connell and Salwa El-Shawan Castelo-Branco, eds., *Music and Conflict* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Alexandra Kolb, ed., *Dance and Politics* (Oxford: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2010); Cynthia Cohen, Roberto Gutiérrez Varela, and Polly O. Walker, eds., *Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict*, Volumes I and II (Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2011); Michelle LeBaron, Carrie MacLeod, and Andrew Floyer Acland, eds., *The Choreography of Resolution: Conflict, Movement, and Neuroscience* (Washington, DC: American Bar Association, 2013); and individual studies of dance’s relationship to forces of power in Brazil, Cambodia, Palestine, and elsewhere.

