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Darpana Performing Group's Creative Interventions in Neoliberal Globalization

Abstract

Boasting one of the largest economies in the world, India is a crucial case-study of both the consequences of and resistance to neoliberal globalization. With the recent wave of economic liberalization of the Indian economy, wealth discrepancies are rising and environmental devastation is displacing/destroying the livelihoods of those who cannot or choose not to enter substantive wage labor and consumer culture (Anand 242). Rural indigenous and low-caste communities disproportionately endure the brunt of displacement as natural resources are privatized and rendered inaccessible to them. Even in urban and upper-middle class populations, the sociological and psychological impact has yet to be fully understood as consumer culture displaces previous family and community structures.

This essay explores performance-based activism as a response to these economic changes and the resulting social injustices using a dance-theater festival in Gujarat, India as a case study. Hosted by Darpana Academy for Performing Arts, the 2014 Vikram Sarabhai Festival showcased three works addressing the theme of displacement, including spiritual displacement in modern community structures, physical displacement of vulnerable rural populations caused by the neoliberal impetus to privatize natural resources, and the impact of voluntary urban displacement on intimate relationships. These performances were intended to educate and move an urban, upper-middle class audience by bringing attention to the problems the rural and indigenous Indian communities are facing as well as by drawing connections between these three prevalent forms of displacement.

Through first-hand ethnographic research, including participant observation of rehearsals and the performances and interviews with the directors and performers, this essay argues that this type of nonviolent, performance-based intervention is an important tool for social change as it appeals not only to the minds but also to the hearts of its audience. If it is to be truly transformative, contemporary human rights activism cannot merely target a localizable enemy but must instead address the material, behavioral, and psychological processes contributing to displacement and community degradation while developing alternative models of consumption and community. Darpana Academy offers one such model as it brings together upper-middle class people to witness dance-theater with an ethical prerogative, providing an alternative to consumer culture.

Bibliography

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Biography

After graduating from Wesleyan University with honors in Dance and Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Kelly Klein co-founded the environmental nonprofit initiative Pick Up America, which performed the nation's first coast-to-coast roadside litter pick-up and advocated for zero-waste. Her doctoral work at The Ohio State University is centered on contemporary Indian political history, somatic pedagogy, subversive performance, and activism in a transnational framework and has been supported by the Mershon Center, the Vera J. Blaine Special Project Fund, the Karen A. Bell Dance Fund, and the Ohio State College of Arts and Sciences