

# Rakini Devi: Diasporic Subject and Agent Provocateur

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*Burmese-Australian choreographer/performer Rakini Devi is informed by her diverse skills in the areas of Classical Indian dance, visual arts and contemporary performance practice. She uses these skills as well as her satirical wit and storytelling abilities to create an intricate portrait of the lived experiences of a contemporary diasporic subject. This is a portrait that is not only aesthetically stimulating but also politically inflected and provocative at the same time. Through her work Devi encourages us to remember that diaspora is more than a theoretical trope, that it is a complex and often contradictory experience which results in joy as well as pain as it is played out on live bodies.*

Diaspora is described as both a theoretical stance and/or a condition of partial belonging, where the subject retains a link or links, however tenuous, to an idea of ‘home’.<sup>1</sup> Although the current uses of the term have the potential to expand its relevance and to make it one that can frame or reflect a diverse range of experiences in an era of increasing globalization, the proliferation of the term’s uses (within cultural studies and postcolonial theory, for example), is also potentially problematic. This proliferation may lead to the trope of diaspora emerging as a generalizing metaphor to reflect the condition of subjectivity in the late-modern period rather than a trope that describes the embodied experiences of individuals and communities<sup>2</sup> as they move (literally and often painfully) across landscapes and homelands.<sup>3</sup> This apparent shift raises a number of important questions about the role of the subject in this process. For example, how is the body marked or inscribed by this journeying and how does the diasporic subject inscribe her/himself within/on the landscapes s/he traverses? A brief overview of some of the ways in which diaspora is currently understood demonstrates that in many cases the important questions about the trauma involved in diasporic experience, as it is played out on lived bodies, increasingly are elided in an attempt to develop a more encompassing theoretical understanding of the term.<sup>4</sup>

Some theorists are quite specific when defining diaspora and provide lists of its characteristic features; others point to it as a state of fusion or in-between-ness where it seems most contemporary subjects might (at least partially) inscribe themselves.<sup>5</sup> In their book *Borders, Exiles, Diasporas*, Elazar Barkan and Marie-Denise Shelton argue that ‘the importance of the concept of “diaspora” as an explanatory paradigm stems from its malleable qualities given that it can apply to diverse communities’.<sup>6</sup> Vijay Mishra in addressing the ‘diasporic imaginary’ suggests that it is a ‘particular condition

of displacement and disaggregation; it is a theoretical template through which we can understand what is becoming a defining feature of the late-modern world'.<sup>7</sup> Avatar Brah asks us to consider the idea of 'diaspora-space' a site within which the equally fraught concepts of the national, the transnational and the local are situated and can be addressed.<sup>8</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis suggests that 'diasporic culture cannot be seen in organicist terms, as if it were a seed that could be transported, and planted elsewhere'. Rather he argues for 'a sense of diasporas that says more about a sensibility towards cultural transformation than designating a place of arrival or rebirth'.<sup>9</sup> Barnor Hesse proposes 'the significance of diaspora as a recurrent transnational and cross-cultural formation [which] emerges as a conduit of reflexive globalization'.<sup>10</sup> Finally, Stuart Hall calls for an understanding of diaspora as mobility, a concept that is about 'routes'. He claims that 'in an era of globalization, we are all becoming diasporic'.<sup>11</sup> If diaspora can refer to, on the one hand, grouped migrants/exiles in a foreign place and, on the other, transnational global citizens who have the possibility of linking to the homeland either virtually or literally, does the term become so generalized that it is rendered meaningless? Is diaspora, then, the stamp of a complex self-reflexive late-modern identity? If this is the case, I become increasingly anxious when I consider what the implications of this definition might be for the diasporic subject who is not a 'world traveller' *par excellence*, or one who arrives in a 'foreign' place without necessarily having access to the cultural codes, or the subject who is conflicted about 'home' and whose memories are not couched in nostalgia or romance but are filled with joy, longing and pain. How will the specificities of these diasporic experiences be mediated or accommodated within such broad definitions? I am not attempting to police the boundaries of discourse here, or to suggest that diaspora should not be re-imagined in an increasingly globalized time. I am suggesting, however, that we avoid falling into the trap of pan-diasporization, by remaining cognizant of the embodied diasporic subject and of the specificities of each diasporic experience. I believe that when the lived body is re-placed within the discussion then the richness of the term is restored or revitalized.<sup>12</sup>

One artist who uses her body to challenge any easy categorizations of diasporic experience is the performance artist and choreographer Rakini Devi. Devi was born in India of Indian and Burmese parents, and she 'trained in Bharata Natyam and Odissi Indian classical dance styles before emigrating to Australia'.<sup>13</sup> Devi arrived in Australia in the 1970s and was 'so unimpressed with Perth' that she quickly fled to Calcutta, where she became 'immersed in Indian Classical music and dance'. Devi states that on her return to Australia she studied at the 'Amala Shankar School of Classical Dance where I began training in Kathak, Bharata Natyam and Kathakali . . . I specialized later in Bharata Natyam, which was my main practice for fifteen years before being "allowed" by my gurus to undertake Odissi'.<sup>14</sup> In recent years she has expanded her oeuvre to include explorations in film, text and new music as well as a range of contemporary dance practices. Devi now performs both classical and experimental or contemporary repertoires. She produces solo works as well as collaborative projects with a diverse range of artists and musicians.<sup>15</sup> In 2002 Devi moved to Sydney in order to expand her practice and exposure. Since her move she has performed classical dance at the Sydney Opera House Studio as well as a range of solo contemporary works at performance/dance

venues in both Sydney and Melbourne. I would read her position as that of contemporary choreographer/performer who refuses easy categorization by virtue of the diversity of her practice and the depth of her skill base.<sup>16</sup> In terms of defining her position within the landscape of Australian performance Devi points out that

regardless of the other performance genres I am involved with, and the fact that I find my visual art, text-driven theatre and comedy as an integral part of my practice, I primarily see my self as a dancer/choreographer. Since I have created all my own choreographic material with the obvious exception of my traditional Indian Classical Dance repertoire, I also find myself in a very isolated area of self-driven, self-motivated art, be it writing text for a piece, or drawing and sketching, or collaborating with artists in other art-forms to realize my personal vision. I also give different answers to my profession depending on who is asking and how much I am prepared to elaborate!<sup>17</sup>

She is a respected artist within both the contemporary dance/performance and the classical dance scene in Australia.<sup>18</sup> Through her sophisticated choreographic and performance techniques Devi continually calls into question ideas of belonging and emplacement.<sup>19</sup> She uses slides, video, musical scores and searing monologues to create work that is both hauntingly evocative and politically poignant.

As she melds autobiographical storytelling and fiction with satire and political commentary Devi rhetorically pierces any simplistic positioning of her work as representative of the reflections of a nostalgic diasporic subject. Instead she presents us with a picture of an empowered, politically aware global citizen who combines fragments of memory with satirical critique to remind us of the complex and often contradictory experience of the diasporic subject in the late-modern period. Devi challenges the audience to consider both their own emplacement within the Australian (or indeed contemporary global) landscape as well as the ways in which they position (or fail to position) others within this same landscape. Her work is evocative, unsettling and beautifully performed, and through her performative embodiment of the 'hyphen' she asks us to move beyond any banal categorizations to an understanding of diaspora as a multiply inflected symbol of longing, belonging, empowerment and memory.<sup>20</sup> This is not comfortable work; instead as the performing subject she sets up a dialectic between the performer and audience in which complex negotiations and re-negotiations of positionality and interpretation have the potential to occur, negotiations which have implications for the spectator's understanding of diaspora as embodied experience.

In recent performances Devi has dealt with a number of recurring themes. Her stories recount the struggles for love experienced by her great-grandmother, grandmother and mother, and highlight the impact of the Raj on her female ancestors in Burma. She creates contemporary movement sequences inspired by her desire to speak about and critique the current vogue for presenting *process* in contemporary dance works. These sequences are interwoven or juxtaposed with classical dance sequences which question taboos, such as the devastating Hindu practice of widow immolation, invocations to Gods/Goddesses and highly satirical attacks on the insensitive borrowings of new age 'philosophy'. Through the skilful interweaving of these different narrative modes and styles of performance Devi moves between the discourses of popular culture

and those of high art. At times she plays the role of sleuth, taking us on an ethnographic journey, unveiling secrets and stories about the experiences of her female ancestors. However, this is not a journey that is imbued with nostalgia; it is, rather, one that enacts Papastergiadis's understanding of diaspora as a 'sensitivity towards cultural transformation'.<sup>21</sup> At other times she moves us swiftly into the present moment with her challenges to aspects of contemporary art and life in a western context. The beauty of the work is in its combination of elements and their embodiment by Devi with flashing eyes, stamping feet and piercing wit.

Devi acts as a radical ethnographer who 'becomes the chronicler of third time-spaces by involving [herself] in making culture, both by producing ethnographic texts and by engaging in political activism'.<sup>22</sup> Through engaging with her performance work we see how she embodies this ethnographic process in a way that allows for the contradictions of the contemporary diasporic experience to be played out. As a performer Devi uses these contradictions to disrupt any easy identification or classification of her work, as she challenges us to see the benefits, as well as the pain, involved in her journeying. Of her recent works I will draw on *The Virtual Goddess* (1997), *Mindimi* (1999), and *Interview with The Virtual Goddess* (2001) to inform my analysis here.<sup>23</sup>

### **Rakini Devi as ethnographic storyteller**

Devi performs a range of interlinked family stories in order to recuperate the travails of her female ancestors. The focus is on aspects of the lives of three women – her great-grandmother, her grandmother and her mother. The first story is that of her great-grandmother's arranged marriage in the north of Burma; the second is her grandmother's 'love' marriage and the difficulties she experienced in attempting to control a philandering husband; and the third is the story of her mother's escape from Japanese-controlled Burma during World War II. These stories are autobiographically based, yet they do not serve as nostalgic celebrations of an absent past. Instead, Devi performs them as a gift to her mother,<sup>24</sup> as a way of recuperating women's voices through telling their stories of pain, loss and love. The focus is on providing a space within which to celebrate the heroism of the women in the face of adversity and on allowing Devi to reflect on how her own journey has taken a different path. By positioning her own experiences in response to the stories of her ancestors, Devi refutes what Susan Stewart calls 'the narrative process of nostalgic reconstruction [where] the present is denied and the past takes on an authenticity of being, an authenticity which, ironically, it can achieve only through narrative'.<sup>25</sup>

In *Mindimi* she performs the story of her great-grandmother's arranged marriage in Burma. This tale is told gently through voice-over, the space is bare (apart from a small raised platform at the side of the space which Devi uses for transitions) and a large scrim that separates us from the performer. This fabric creates a sense of distance between the spectators and the performer, as if we are seeing the story from outside a mosquito net, or that we are peeping through a dusty window, or being let in on a secret. Despite the separation we feel close to Devi as she moves slowly into the centre of the space. She wears a large red sari that is draped above her head and trails across the floor behind her. The

music is slow pipe music with cello sounds in the background. As the story unfolds she lowers the sari and sits on the floor. Her face is shrouded in an opaque veil. She is wearing an elaborate oyster-coloured wedding gown. Devi performs passionate and precise hand gestures, as if she is urging us to listen carefully to a very important story and although we cannot see her face, we can read these gestures. Her great-grandmother was the daughter of a Shan Tribal Chieftain in the Shan Hills to the north of British-occupied Burma. He was offered land and title by the British if he 'would relinquish his ravaging and pillaging of the countryside, the agreement was cemented with the arranged marriage of his only daughter (my great grandmother, Amayji) to a Scottish official'. Devi's great-grandmother was not happy with this news and fled on horseback, only to be 'tamed' by her father's 'cruel whip'. As the story unfolds Devi stands up and winds the sari with her feet, eventually lifting it up and with her back to us binding the sari fabric around her wrists to demonstrate her great-grandmother's bondage and lack of power to determine her fate. Devi then turns to us and pulls the scrim back so that we enter the space and become partners in the narrative. The trauma of Amayji's whipping gradually becomes apparent to us. Devi goes on to say in a solemn tone: 'For years my great-grandmother would relate this story and point to the scar below her ribs'. She then removes her own shroud and gently moves centre stage to perform a slow, classical dance sequence as a large photograph of her Amayji is projected on the backdrop. She is wearing a long wig of thick, braided black hair and her dance is slow and graceful, almost reverent. Devi tells us that her mother says she resembles Amayji and she is pleased as she thinks she was a strong woman who survived 'the trauma of an arranged marriage to a Scottish barbarian who had a roving eye and a taste for Scottish brew'. Devi adds a parasol to her ensemble and goes on to talk about her grandmother who was more fortunate than her great-grandmother because she was lucky enough to have a 'love' marriage. However, when she discovered that her husband was philandering she decided to intervene. This leads us into a story about Devi's grandmother and her attempts to alter her husband's unfaithful ways. She tells us about her grandmother setting off 'on a bullock cart through dense jungle' to catch her husband with his mistress. When she arrived she saw her husband fleeing the 'love nest' on horseback and decided to take her revenge. 'She spied a lamp burning nearby . . . Fire! As all the huts were joined in rows, terror and anguish soon spread through the entire village.'<sup>26</sup> As Devi narrates these stories she employs a range of gestures from her Indian Classical dance vocabularies: foot-stamping, flashing eyes and angular neck gestures, to increase the dramatic intensity of the moment.<sup>27</sup> The passion exhibited here is suddenly calmed when she performs her grandmother's appearance in court. Adopting a coy expression she tells us how her grandmother dealt with the charges:

Following the instructions of her cunning and eloquent British lawyer (well actually he was an Armenian Jew), her appearance in court was a polished and spectacular performance. Attired in full Mindimi<sup>28</sup> ceremonial costume, accompanied by a large dark maid holding aloft a parasol, my grandmother was a vision of elegance and Burmese gentility, standing just under four feet tall in her velvet slippers, with suitably downcast eyes, while her lawyer ranted on about the charges being a conspiracy due

to the high nature of her husband's position. Could this genteel woman, who never leaves home without a chaperone to go to another village, fight thorough the dense jungle on foot to perpetrate these crimes? Impossible, Obviously a slanderous plot! 'Case dismissed'.

The story does not end with this fairytale, however, as Devi goes on to tell us that her grandfather 'never mended his ways'. So despite the fact that her grandmother's life was easier than her great-grandmother's she was, in effect, treated more like a possession than a partner in marriage; she was, 'spoilt and indulged because of her beautiful fair skin and round moon like face'. On one level it appears that Devi may be mobilizing the trope of the 'exotic or romantic Other' in these sequences (at least visually), with the use of elaborate costumes, saris, large photographs of her beautiful ancestors projected on the backdrop, red lighting and the scrim. This trope is quickly fractured, however, as she intervenes in the narrative as an active, contemporary subject, who ensures that the painful sides of these experiences are clearly shared with us.

Devi also tells us the story of her mother's escape from Japanese-occupied Burma to India during World War II. In telling this story Devi performs a movement sequence in which the mental and physical toll of the trek becomes evident. As Naomi Millett points out in her review, Devi 'bows repeatedly, in a parody of obedient submission, glances over her shoulder, fights off invisible tormentors, twitches, half mad with despair'.<sup>29</sup> Devi's narrative is as evocative as her movement: 'Hundreds died in the first few months, marooned by heavy monsoon rains. People would awake in the morning to find their loved ones dead'. She goes on to tell us that her mother 'originally set off with 20 garments



FIG. 1 Rakini Devi is 'claimed by the floor' as she performs *Mindimi Trek* at the JADE new Wave Contemporary Dance showcase in Tokyo, 2002. (Copyright Rakini Devi.)



FIG. 2 Rakini Devi performs *Mindimi Trek* at the JADE new Wave Contemporary Dance showcase in Tokyo, 2002. (Copyright Rakini Devi.)

in a bundle, including her beautiful Mindimi costume. Along the way she had to discard each garment. She also had to shave off her knee-length hair, which became matted and infested'. As this powerful story unfolds the performer gets closer to the floor as if attempting to cast off demons. She looks behind furtively and continually shakes her head as she hunches and scratches and digs at the floor. It is unclear whether she is attempting to bury herself, to protect herself from tormentors or to search for food. She is gradually claimed by the floor and lies on her back moving as if dragging herself by the heels. We sense the despair; the journey has become too much. Devi waves her arms from side to side, brushing the floor like a discarded puppet. As the long trek progresses Devi's mother lost all of her possessions and traded her jewellery to survive and to bury her new husband.

There is no naïve recuperation, no happy ending. Here we see the diasporic subject participating in the empirical work of maintaining 'a memory, vision, or myth about [her] original homeland'.<sup>30</sup> Yet this intimate portrait is not allowed to stagnate; these stories are not used to create a romantic ideal. Instead they are juxtaposed with other stories of loss, hardship and politics as well as humour and satire, so that we see the depth and complexity of Devi's subject position. While some spectators have found these personal stories highly evocative and reflective of the experiences of their own families, the narratives are not presented in any idealized or nostalgic sense.<sup>31</sup> As Susan Bennett points out:

In all of its manifestations, nostalgia is, in its praxis, conservative (in at least two senses its political alignment and its motive to keep things intact and unchanged): it leans on an imagined and imaginary past which is more and better than the present and for



FIG. 3 An image of Rakini's face in full make-up is projected onto the backdrop during her performance of *Mindimi*, at PICA 1999. (Copyright Rakini Devi.)

which the carrier of the nostalgia, in a defective and diminished present, in some way or other longs. This dynamic of the good past/bad present is, as Fred Davis points out, nostalgia's 'distinctive rhetorical signature'.<sup>32</sup>

Devi avoids the trap of nostalgia by plainly telling us that these women were bounded by their context and lacked the agency to determine their life direction and stories, whereas she, on the other hand, has been fortunate enough to enjoy some opportunity to direct her own life.

Through this performance we see the potential for reinvesting diaspora with meaning, as Devi corporeally inscribes a complex plural identity within the performance space, requiring an equally complex response from the spectator. We are implicated in the performance process and encouraged to think beyond stereotype. In discussing the notion of the nomadic subject, who in this instance resembles the diasporic subject, Rosi Braidotti states that 'transformation can only be achieved through de-essentialized embodiment or strategically re-essentialized embodiment by working through the multi-layered structures of one's embodied self'. She goes on to say that this is not a 'call for easy pluralism . . . but rather a passionate plea for the recognition of the need to respect the multiplicity and to find forms of action that reflect the complexity – without drowning in it'.<sup>33</sup> It seems to me that it is this process of 'working through' that Devi carries out in her performances. She carefully moves through the traces of stories and issues that are important to her as a politically aware artist, digging out ethnographic fragments of experience that, at times joyfully and at other times stingingly, fracture and add to the multiple realities and memories that make up her own subjectivity. Here we are encouraged to move beyond surface acknowledgements of difference, so that we have the potential to become implicated in the meanings created through the performance.

Memory has its part to play, but by contextualizing it within such multi-layered practice Devi asks us to think before we respond, to meet her complexity with our own and to think through what it means to be diasporic in the late-modern moment. She positions her familial stories within her work, as they are the narratives that inform her own subjectivity: 'The women in my mother's family did not have a choice in their transition or transformations. I hope I have changed their history, as they have shaped mine'.<sup>34</sup> She clearly sees her role as an explorer of memory and at the same time as a performer who has the power to raise political issues by weaving stories and evocative movement sequences together into layered performances, which move out from the personal to critique ideas of identity, belonging, oppression and power.

### **Rakini Devi as political agent**

From her vantage point as the diasporic subject who exists both within and outside Australian cultural life, Devi has the potential to intervene politically and to challenge practices she sees as flawed or dangerous. The two issues that she critiques most often are the appropriation of aspects of Hindu spirituality by western culture, and the ways in which contemporary western dancers focus on and utilize *process* in performance. Devi responds to these issues in performance through a number of hilariously funny sequences. Her humour is political and, in the case of the use of Hindu spirituality

in western culture, challenges the ways in which Eastern traditions are effortlessly and erroneously appropriated (often without regard for context) in the contemporary 'spirituality' market. As Devi points out:

A few years ago I did a show called *Kali* and a man came up to me and said 'are you ever scared that the goddess will manifest when you dance?' and I said 'the goddess always manifests when I dance'. I used sarcasm to make the point but it was completely lost. He then said that his third chakra had actually 'blown'; it sounded like a car blowing a gasket or something! At that stage I just looked at him really hard and said 'excuse me I have to go over there' and I walked away.<sup>35</sup>

In *Interview with a Virtual Goddess*<sup>36</sup> Devi dons a veil and turns to the audience proclaiming herself to be a 'Temple-dancing Goddess'. She introduces herself as a 'channeller and oracle of the ancient ones' and moves frantically while addressing the audience in a hyper trance-like state where she says:

I just . . . just FEEL the power surging from my third eye, seeking those amongst you less fortunate beings who need my help. For instance . . . you Sir . . . I can feel your third eye throbbing . . . and you, madam . . . is your kundalini dislocated? What about your aura – I know its fading fast . . . but I can heal you.<sup>37</sup>

This quasi-evangelical moment is suddenly shattered as she pretends to rush off and answer a mobile phone. She proceeds to say loudly, from off-stage, 'Hello, yes, speaking, we have the Chakra Introduction, the Tantric Intensive and of course the Goddess Within workshop'. As New Age 'philosophy' has been quite popular in parts of urban Western Australia, watching this woman writhing and gyrating whilst complaining of her third-eye problems, at least initially, could have been a little disconcerting for some of the spectators who may have experimented with such approaches themselves. However, while the audience may be a little unsure how to interpret all of this channelling and passionate healing they soon realize the satire at play and begin to laugh in response. In this particular sequence the humour takes on a melodramatic form when, as if throbbing with the 'Goddess within', she states:

I have come to work amongst you . . . it is not often you have a Goddess in your midst, and I am but an instrument in the WORKSHOP that is your life . . . as you all know there is an Indian Temple-Dancing Goddess within each and everyone of us . . . I invite your inner child, your higher self, bring everything . . . let us Deconstruct, Reconstruct – layering, stripping bare the de-synthesizing aesthetic of the semiotic hybrid isolation of the psyche . . . here take my card and call me, just call me.

This call to unleash the 'inner child/Goddess' is performed with darting eyes, intricate hand gestures and is delivered in a seductive yet poignant tone. This seduction has a sting, however, and we are encouraged here to think beyond stereotype and symbol to consider, on a deeper level, the ways in which we might interpret or appropriate the rituals of other cultures. It is not enough to acknowledge difference; Devi urges us to move beyond any reliance on static definitions and easy answers. She says that when people approach her and want to talk about spirituality she responds by saying 'this is a serious subject, don't

expect me to stand here and provide cocktail teachings on the matter. If you are really interested in Hindu mythology go and take a course in religious studies at university, go to the library and read books'.<sup>38</sup> The misappropriation of religious symbols and ideas is a subject that Devi believes needs to be dealt with ruthlessly. She does not accept that people should be indulged when they are not informed, but uses melodramatic humour to highlight the absurdity of some of these appropriations.

The other issue that Devi often parodies is what she sees as the overuse of *process* in contemporary dance practice. Although she utilizes both contemporary and classical dance in many of her works Devi does not accept contemporary dance unquestioningly. She critiques what she sees as its excesses. Perhaps it is a consequence of her classical training that she demands a certain standard of polish in terms of what can be presented as finished work, a standard that does not accommodate the desire that many contemporary dancers have to include *process* in the final performance. In *Interview with a Virtual Goddess* Devi performs a sequence where she challenges this by comparing the requirements of her own training with some of the requirements of contemporary dance, pointing out that: embracing the floor was not encouraged in my training . . . softening behind the knees and melting over ones bones was frowned upon. Full body contact out of the question. Undulating, totally unnecessary, loose wrists and lolling necks unfortunate'.

As she recites these 'do nots', she undulates, rolls around, embraces the floor and softens at every possible point.<sup>39</sup> The effect is hilarious as we see a parody of some of the more ridiculous elements of some western contemporary dance practices. She goes on to say 'when one embodies the Goddess one does not grovel, gyrate or roll on floors, which is why I love the floor like a forbidden lover'. Here we see her ability to self-parody: while calling other forms into question, she highlights some of the more rigid elements of her own classical training. Devi continues by performing a range of moves from the vocabulary of contemporary dance which, when highlighted, seem utterly ridiculous. She performs 'the run' the 'neutral gaze'. My favourite (and the most scathing) is her comment about 'the whispered passages from one's diary – sounds like a lot of serious research – you just never know where it make take you, for instance (as she thrusts her leg out wide) when I do this I just want to go here and when I . . . my leg just wants to (we watch as Devi gyrates and flings her legs around the space in intense seriousness), we are in hysterics, 'it's about feeling the body in the space, (and then in a smouldering tone) the body and space, Oh I feel so centred'. Yes, this is silly stuff to some extent, but for those of us who attend contemporary dance and performance events on a regular basis her commentary rings true. How many times do we watch work that is not fully formed and with gestures employed for the sake of the image rather than to 'do something'? Devi provides a moment of reflection on what the craft is for. What is dance about? Through her use of humour and skilful caricature (as well as her own satirical cross-cultural shifts) she embodies a range of practices and uses them to critique as well as celebrate a range of forms of expression, as her website clearly points out: 'Rakini's works demonstrate her constant enquiry into creating a unique dance vocabulary that not only investigates new forms, but enhances the vitality latent in ancient ones.'<sup>40</sup> Larry Ruffell, in an enthusiastic review, states: In her originality, Rakini holds a mirror to contemporary values which,

from a traditional perspective, appear shallow, artificial and material. In her mastery of two diverse cultures, she creates a new synthesis which is intelligible, powerful and entertaining.<sup>41</sup>

However, a number of critics who laud Devi for her creative talents and her skilful cross-cultural dance practices find her critiques of the ‘new age’ and of contemporary dance difficult and point to these as a weakness in her work. Is there a desire for work that deals with nostalgia or politics without the humour; does the humour degrade the sophistication of the pieces? For me, the humour and the direct challenge to the audience are some of the most potent aspects of Devi’s oeuvre. It is here that we are implicated in the work and called upon to consider our own understandings of the term diaspora in response to the ways in which we see it being embodied within the space. However, this is not a call that is appreciated by everyone, as Naomi Millet points out: Towards the end, Rakini takes the opportunity to have a witty go at New Age trends in dance, then at critics and others who have misunderstood her craft. If her intention is to unsettle us with this abrupt, satirical shift, she succeeds, though it is surprising that an artist of such obvious calibre would waste time lamenting what others think of her.<sup>42</sup>

Rita Clarke, in an otherwise glowing review, states that ‘less natter would give the performance edge’.<sup>43</sup> Do these critics desire some kind of purity of form and see Devi’s humour as fracturing this? Devi sets up a dialogue between the rarefied practices of Classical dance and many of the symbols of popular culture (channelling, melodrama, etc.) creating a transgressive performance in which the spectator is at once impressed and seduced by the beauty of the traditional practice and, at the same time, involved in a complex game that requires us to think deeply about a range of issues that we may not have previously considered. Devi uses satire to highlight the ways in which she can ‘blow up – both enlarge and explode – the hyphen’.<sup>44</sup> Through her play with aspects of both western contemporary and classical Indian dance she demonstrates the ease with which she can move between and within different forms to create a range of works which highlight the embodied complexity of the diasporic subject.

Devi attempts to reconcile many aspects of her experience within each piece. Each of her works is fractured in the sense that it does not cohere in any linear fashion. There is no beginning, middle or end with Devi; instead, there are layers of experience presented and these are punctuated by political insight and beautifully crafted movement sequences, which combine her training in a range of dance forms. These performances, however, are not completely or directly dominated by the spoken word, politics and humour. In many works she includes specific dance pieces that comment on political or aesthetic concerns without relying on spoken language at all. Here she focuses instead on evocation through movement – on demonstrating her considerable skill and allowing her cross-cultural practice to tell the story. In *The Virtual Goddess* Devi combines Classical (Odissi) and contemporary dance in a beautifully evocative and confronting choreographic piece entitled ‘Suttee’. This is a piece in which she addresses the ‘Hindu ritual of widow immolation’. It is, as critic Sonia Humphries points out, ‘a terrifying, haunting piece, of shape-changing floating drapery and masks, nightmarish and deeply disturbing’.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, it is a disturbing sequence which confronts us with its silence and its poignancy. We see curving and angular movements, with dramatic glances and complex footwork,

melded together with a softer vocabulary of contemporary dance. This combination harnesses the best of Devi's training to push the boundaries of her form(s) and create a sense of profound unease amongst the spectators. Once she has finished there is a deep silence in the space and all of the laughter from earlier comedic quips has vanished. The feeling of sadness is almost palpable. While her spoken work can be searing, so too can the intensity achieved through her movement vocabulary and choreographic skill. As a subject with access to different worlds Devi uses her knowledge and her vantage point to embody the pain of this horrific practice and to draw attention to the unspoken anguish of *Suttee*.

### Conclusion

It is in the juxtaposition of her personal narratives of displacement and love/loss to her stinging critiques of surface spirituality and haunting choreographic sequences that Devi's power lies. She punctures any easy identification and indeed any dismissal of her work as light relief, all the time weaving her beautifully crafted movement pieces into the work. Devi denies any nostalgic notions of diaspora and demands that the plurality of cultural identification be acknowledged and delved into in response to her work. As Vijay Mishra points out: 'the narrative of diasporas confirms that postmodern ethnicities are here to stay. After all, the postmodern nation-state is a complex socio-economic formation with multiple cultural repertoires in which diasporas are always provisionally and problematically inserted'.<sup>46</sup>

Rakini Devi through her performance work embodies many of the complexities of diasporic subjectivity at the beginning of the twenty-first century. There is no easy romanticization of the term here. Devi's recounting of diasporic narratives (that could so easily turn into nostalgia in the hands of another performer) means that they become incisive comments on the pain, anguish and challenges associated with the lived experiences of subjects who are always 'provisionally and problematically inserted' into various nation-states. The performative embodiment of her outside/inside position in terms of both the form and content of her work – her ability to combine a range of styles from the classical to the contemporary, not just for exotic display but rather to make a political comment about taboos, the ability to critique incisively the appropriation by the western 'spirituality' market of sacred Hindu symbols and ideas, as well as her witty play with contemporary dance and its excesses, positions Devi as a performer who reinvests diaspora with political power. As a consequence of this positioning Devi charges the spectators to move beyond easy alliances or appropriations and asks them to think through the implications of the notion that we *all* might easily be, or have the potential to become, diasporic subjects in this period of increasing globalization.

#### NOTES

- 1 Home in this context is a land to which one can return either literally or virtually (cognizant of the fact that it is in constant flux). This potential for return or linkage with the homeland is an important feature of contemporary understandings of diaspora and is also important in an economic sense as in

- many cases the homeland depends on the faithful (fiscal) support of the diasporic subject as well as the existence of that subject to reinforce ideas about what 'home' might mean. As James Clifford points out: 'The empowering paradox of Diaspora is that dwelling *here* assumes solidarity and connection *there*. But *there* is not necessarily a single place or an exclusivist nation'. James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 269.
- 2 The term 'community' is one which, in the past, has been synonymous with the term 'diaspora'. In this regard it is important to point out that I understand the term here in the sense defined by Barbara Herrnstein Smith in *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 168: 'contemporary communities are not only internally complex and highly differentiated but also continuously and rapidly reconfigured'. This definition highlights the mobility and fluidity of the term and is helpful in describing the experiences of the contemporary diasporic subject who may have different levels of access to a range of global communities.
  - 3 Not to mention the issue of financial cost and empowerment in terms of access to modes of mobility. For an interesting paper on the problematics of differencing within a poststructuralist world see: Rey Chow, 'The Interruption of Referentiality: Poststructuralism and the Conundrum of Critical Multiculturalism', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101, 1 (2002), pp. 171–86.
  - 4 There have been many different diasporas throughout history. For more information on this, see: Vijay Mishra, 'The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora', *Textual Practice* 10, 3 (1996), pp. 421–47, where he differentiates between the diasporas of 'classic capitalism and the mid- to late twentieth-century diasporas of advanced capital to the metropolitan centres of the Empire, the New World and the former settler colonies'. Mishra goes on to explain that V. S. Naipaul is the 'founding writer of the old Indian Diaspora' and he suggests that 'the new Indian diaspora is mediated in the works of Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Meera Nair', p. 422.
  - 5 For example theorists such as Gerard Chaliend and Jean-Pierre Rageau argue for an understanding of diaspora as predicated upon empirical indicators. For more information, see: *The Penguin Atlas of Diasporas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995). William Safran also outlines a number of features of diaspora in his article: 'Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return', *Diaspora*, 1, 1 (1991), pp. 83–99.
  - 6 Elazar Barkan and Marie-Denise Shelton, 'Introduction', *Borders, Exiles, Diasporas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 5.
  - 7 Mishra, 'Diasporic Imaginary', p. 442.
  - 8 Avatar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996).
  - 9 Nikos Papastergiadis, *Dialogues in the Diasporas: Essays and Conversations on Cultural Identity* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1998), p. xi.
  - 10 Barnor Hesse 'Reviewing the Western Spectacle: Reflexive Globalization Through the Black Diaspora', in Avatar Brah *et al.*, eds., *Global Futures: Migration, Environment and Globalization* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 122–43.
  - 11 Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal 'Interview with Stuart Hall: Culture and Power', in Rodolfo D. Torres, Louis F. Miron and Jonathan Xavier Inda, eds., *Race, Identity and Citizenship: A Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), p. 402.
  - 12 Jacqueline Lo talks about the need to restore 'intentionality' (following Bakhtin) to the term hybridity. It is this 'intentionality' that I see as vital for a politically useful understanding of diaspora as it relates to lived experience. While Lo is not specifically arguing for the embodiment of the term her argument for the need to re-interpret hybridity (or indeed to reclaim it) so that it is reinvested with political efficacy has resonance here. She provides examples of how this can be done through analysis of the work of contemporary performers Anna Yen and William Yang. For more information see: 'Beyond Happy Hybridity: Performing Asian-Australian Identities', in Ien Ang *et al.*, eds., *Alter/Asians: Asian-Australian Identities in Art, Media and Popular Culture* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 2000), pp. 152–68.

- 13 Devi emigrated to Australia with her family but remains vague about the details surrounding this move in order to keep her age a secret. In her performance ‘Woman In Transit’ she points out that she was ‘barely an embryo’ when she arrived in Perth.
- 14 Personal correspondence with author.
- 15 For more information on her training, experience and practice see Devi’s website:  
<http://www.rakinidevi.iinet.net.au>
- 16 Devi’s repertoire includes *Mindimi Trek* (1999/2001/2002) which was performed (solo) in Tokyo as part of the JADE New Wave Contemporary dance showcase as well as at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA). *Claustrophobia* (2001/2002) which was performed with live music (bass and cello) in Tokyo at Kei Takei’s Studio, at the Performing Arts Market, and in Sydney for the Bodies Festival and the Antistatic Dance festival. A site-specific work, *Calcutta Manga* (2001–02), which was performed in different formats at the JADE Festival in Tokyo, at PICA, and at the Sydney Opera House Studio.
- 17 Unpublished email correspondence with author.
- 18 Devi presents much of her performance work in venues such as (PICA) and The Performance Space (in Sydney). These venues cater for artists who play with form and content and engage in experimental or ‘hybrid arts’ practice.
- 19 Edward Casey uses this term in his work on place – it refers to the literal and figurative inscriptions of place. For more information, see: *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).
- 20 My use of the term ‘hyphen’ here is inspired by the work of Trinh T. Minh-ha who sees the ‘hyphenated condition’ as an enabling, rather than limiting condition of partial belonging. She states: ‘The multidimensional desire to be both here(s) and there(s) implies a more radical ability to shuttle between frontiers and to cut across ethnic allegiances while assuming a specific and contingent legacy’. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 159.
- 21 Papastergiadis, *Dialogues*, p. xi.
- 22 Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg, ‘Introduction: Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity’ in Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg, eds., *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 21.
- 23 *Mindimi* and *The Virtual Goddess* were solo works.
- 24 This is particularly the case in *Mindimi*, which Devi says was created as a gift to her mother. However these stories, or aspects of them, are performed in both *The Virtual Goddess* and *Interview with The Virtual Goddess*. At each retelling the stories are performed slightly differently. For the purposes of clarity my analysis of these stories comes from *Mindimi*.
- 25 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 23.
- 26 Quotations are from unpublished script given to the author by Devi.
- 27 These gestures cannot be attributed solely to Devi’s classical training. When I asked her about these she replied by saying that she has developed her own ‘vocabulary based on many aspects of Indian classical dance’ but that she ‘never uses any of them “literally” in any contemporary work’. She also stated:
- Admittedly, in my formative years as a cross cultural choreographer experimenting with dancers in my company, I would use actual phrases from classical dance and create sequences, but I have since, as a soloist, found a freedom in creating movement that I enjoy and that is specific to my own experience... My teachers always praised my ‘abhinaya’ which is expression/mime, in particular my eyes, and it is the aspect I try to utilize the most including in all my contemporary work, as it is an element lacking in most western dance. (Personal correspondence with author.)
- 28 *Mindimi* means ‘Burmese Princess’ a title passed down to the females in Devi’s family. It also means temple dancer.

- 29 This review was written by Naomi Millett for the journal *Dance Australia* cited in the Review section of Devi's website.
- 30 Safran, 'Diasporas', p. 83.
- 31 Devi has pointed out that people often approach her after performances to thank her for telling these stories. She performed *Mindimi* in Japan recently and although she was a little tentative about performing the story of her mother's escape from the Japanese in World War II for a Japanese audience she found the audience to be very responsive and interested in learning more about the trek. Devi said 'they were intrigued and that is the best thing you can achieve as a performer'. (Personal interview.)
- 32 Although Bennett's focus is on Shakespeare, her comments are pertinent here. For more information, see Susan Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 5.
- 33 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 171.
- 34 Unpublished interview with the author, 28 October 2002.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 *Interview with a Virtual Goddess* was performed at PICA in February 2001. This was a 'work-in-progress' in which Devi worked with Nigel Kellaway a well-known Australian performer, director and dramaturg. Kellaway's role was to direct the piece in preparation for the Adelaide Arts Market in 2001. Many of Devi's signature stories and sequences were used in this piece so I have decided to focus on it here. Kellaway's intervention in the piece was for me, the only weakness in the performance. His artistic involvement included a phoney interview sequence at the start of the performance that delayed our engagement with Devi. I don't know why Kellaway became involved and I felt that Devi did not need this intervention. In fact I interpreted his role as one of colonization of the work by the desire to inscribe his own stories upon it.
- 37 Unpublished script for *Interview with a Virtual Goddess*.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 In her article entitled 'Imaginary Homelands: Creating A New Dance Language', Shobana Jeyasingh talks about Bharata Natyam's relationship with the floor 'It is a dance which very much obeys the pulls of gravity. It is very aware of the floor, but the way it actually relates to the floor is very contained, very formal', in Alexandra Carter, ed., *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader* (Routledge: London, 1998), p. 49.
- 40 <http://www.rakinidevi.iinet.net.au>
- 41 Larry Ruffell, 'Mirror on Contemporary Values', cited in the review section of Devi's website.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Rita Clarke, 'Mindimi: The Burmese Princess', *The Australian*, 16 August 1999. See, <http://www.rakinidevi.iinet.net.au>
- 44 Lavie and Swedenburg, 'Introduction: Displacement', p. 16.
- 45 Sonia Humphries, 'Putting In the Virtual Slipper', *The Australian*, 19 June 1998. See, <http://www.rakinidevi.iinet.net.au>
- 46 Mishra, 'Diasporic Imaginary'.

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