

JAY PATHER, PERFORMANCE,  
AND SPATIAL POLITICS IN  
SOUTH AFRICA



Ketu H. Katrak

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I first met Jay Pather in 2019 at Confluences, a conference sponsored by the Centre for Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies at the University of Cape Town, where he is professor and director of the Institute for Creative Arts. It was only my second trip to South Africa (the first was in 2016 to Johannesburg), and I was still getting to know the dance and performance scenes. Among many other talks and events, the conference featured a launch party for Pather's book *Acts of Transgression* (2019), which he co-edited with Catherine Boule. The conference and the book served as a crash course in the vibrant South African contemporary dance, theater, and live art scene, of which Pather has been a mainstay for four decades. Three years later, when I ran into Pather in New York City at New York Live Arts, where Robyn Orlin's 2016 work for Albert Ibokwe Khoza was having its New York premiere, he was just wrapping up the first part of a residency at Villa Albertine, before heading to the Netherlands for the Afrovibes Festival, which he curates. He is a prolific choreographer, well-published author, and curator of festivals in Europe and Africa. For an artist of such international status and acclaim, there has been surprisingly little published in dance studies about Jay Pather. In that regard, Ketu Katrak's book is a welcome intervention in the literature.

*Jay Pather, Performance, and Spatial Politics in South Africa* is the first book-length treatment of Pather. It considers his body of work from the 1980s through 2020, including choreography (both for his company, the Durban-based Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre, and project-based work), curation, and writing. The introduction chapter sketches the broad strokes of Pather's career, putting his life and work in the context of South African Indians, South African contemporary dance, and international live art

festivals. Following the introduction, the book has three parts, each with two chapters. Each part takes up a particular notion of space, as well as a specific focus of Pather's career, which also coincides with a chronological stage in said career. For example, part 1, "Journeys across Political, Social-racial, and Geographic Borderlines: Interconnecting the Past, Present and Future," addresses Pather's performance and choreography in the 1980s and 1990s that engages the history and status of Indians in South Africa as well as issues of apartheid and homosexuality. Part 2, "The Transitional and the Inbetween: Theoretical and Creative Engagements with Urban Geography (2000–2015)," attends to Pather's body of site-specific and site-responsive works made in relation to notions of belonging and history and memory, with particular attention to how Pather's work critiques postapartheid society and politics. Part 3, "Curatorial Choreographies: Challenges of Curating Public Art Festivals (2007–Present)," includes one chapter on Pather's curation of live art festivals such as *Infecting the City and Live Art*, both in Cape Town, and a conclusion. While this structure makes sense for a book attempting both overview and analysis of an artist's work, there is nonetheless a tension across the book between following a chronological survey of Pather's body of work and developing an argument about particular segments of it.

At the heart of the book is an argument about spatial politics: of the body, of site work (the city), of curation of (global) festivals, and in the case of the former two, the effects of apartheid on the sites of bodies and cities, historically and in current times. Katrak draws on Esha Niyogi De and Sonita Sarkar's notion of "placetime" (2002) for the ways that geography and history work together, particularly in the South African context of apartheid's strict delineation of access to places based on race, and the ways that this continues to play out in the geographies of postapartheid cities.

In chapter 1, "Crossing (Over): Indian Ocean Migrations," "space" and "spatial journeys" refer geographically to the nations of India and South Africa, Indian spaces in South Africa (neighborhoods, institutions), and the

ways that different dance forms employed by Pather (ballet, kathak, gumboot) take space on stage. In part 2, Katrak alludes to Pather's writings and site performances alternately as theorizing space and as intervening in it, particularly for the ways that it explicitly challenges apartheid-era exclusions of Black people in everyday sites like markets and shopping malls, as well as sites with historical significance such as Constitution Hill, the site of a former prison that now houses the Constitutional Court. Katrak refers to the former as site-specific and the later as site-responsive, which she distinguishes as work that taps "in to an audience's knowledge of a location's history and its past and present, so they may be stunned by its subversion" (208–209). Throughout the book Katrak makes frequent use of citations from classic theorists of space such as Edward Soja, Edward Casey, and Henri Lefebvre, favoring a broad application of theories of space rather than a deep development of a focused concept or theory. This kind of broad orientation to "spatial politics" continues in part 3, where it is both applied to and seen as emanating from a multisite festival (*Infecting the City*) in a specific geographic location (Cape Town) that deeply engages with the built environment and its complex histories and legacies of colonialism, apartheid, and racial exclusion from spaces. However, the subject and context of the performances, and Pather's own writing on the works, are sometimes taken as evidence of meaning rather than developing a deep analysis of the works on their own terms.

Whereas Katrak's book surveys Pather's body of work to date, in two chapters of *Performance and the Afterlives of Injustice*, Catherine Cole focuses primarily on Pather's work in the postapartheid period. One chapter includes a close reading of Pather's noted 2008 work *Body of Evidence* (also discussed in Katrak's preface), while the other productively analyzes Pather's work alongside that of his contemporaries Robyn Orlin and Brett Bailey in order to explore with how performance artists have grappled with the afterlives of racial injustice in South Africa. These two books may be fruitfully read alongside one another to gain both an encyclopedic overview of the work as well as an in-depth analysis of one particular

piece and how the work functions alongside other artists of the same generation.

As a professor in the Department of Drama at the University of California, Irvine, with training in African drama and literature and experience in Asian American Studies, Katrak relies on methods of close reading for her analysis of Pather's work in addition to conducting interviews and archival research. In particular, she relies heavily on the writings of Adrienne Sichel, South Africa's preeminent dance critic, as well as Pather's own writing. Katrak clearly admires Pather's work deeply and values the extensive writing and analysis he himself has published. Sometimes, however, it feels like the book is a vehicle to share Pather's work rather than to create a unique argument about it. In other words, it is not always clear where Pather's analysis ends and Katrak's begins.

The thirty black-and-white photographs in the book are largely of scenes from performances examined in the text, but also include some images of sites related to Pather's work and South African history (e.g., Robben Island), and key individuals in the work. By and large, the photographs serve as visual representations of the discussion at hand, rather than for example as subjects for close reading.

Chapters of the book would be welcome additions to undergraduate or graduate courses addressing Asian diasporic dance and performance, contemporary dance and performance on the African continent, dance and politics, dance and space, and courses that examine artists' work across multiple venues and practices. Sections of the book could also be productively used in practice courses that examine intercultural choreography and performance making.

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## Works Cited

- Cole, Catherine. 2020. *Performance and the Afterlives of Injustice*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
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