

“I've danced my whole life, but none of that is useful at all”: Netflix’s We Speak Dance (2018), Vulnerability and Collaborative Critiques

Melissa Blanco Borelli

In Netflix's short, five-part documentary web series We Speak Dance (2018), dancer and former UN advisor Vandana Hart travels to Paris, Beirut, Lagos, Ho Chi Minh City and Bali to dance with dance artists who, according to her, are revolutionising the way dance functions in their respective countries. It created quite a stir among dance scholars, especially Meiver De la Cruz. She is the inspiration for this collective endeavor. She prompted many of us with a social media post on 9 December 2017 where she alerted us to the airing of the series, and invited dance scholar friends to view the series and then offer reflections, criticisms and discussions. Their informal comments on her Facebook page were tinged with dismay, disbelief and anger. Rather than keep our collective thoughts and feelings concentrated there, I suggested using this issue of Conversations as an opportunity to publicise some of these critiques. In other words, we wanted to make our anger public, productive and political.

I am reminded of the work on anger by black feminist scholar Audre Lorde and American philosopher Alphonso Lingis. For Lorde, anger is “loaded with information and energy” (1997, 280). In short it carries capacious potentiality that, when mobilized against racism for example, can bring about social alternatives and changes. As she explains, every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with

precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in all those assumptions underlining our lives. (280)

Lingis’ stand alone essay entitled “Anger” offers a configuration of community based on shared anger at the dramatic inequality of the world in which consumer culture, what he terms “the technocratic commercial archipelago” rests on the massive exploitation of cheap labor in the “outer zone.” (1997, 72). “Those in the archipelago are alienated from their labor and their world which is consumed in advance, while those in the “outer zone” live lives of massive exploitation and poverty.”(74) Anger offers a mode to oppose these geographic simulacra that keep us apart. It also signals how sovereign states use these simulacra of differences to prevent those on the outside from stepping in. Yet, it is only when we make contact with those in the “outer zone” does this anger arise, says Lingis. Through contact we see “the significance of their singular and communal forms of life.”(75) Lingis advocates for a type of travel voyeurism, where those from the (wealthier) global north go to the “outer zones” of the global south/east to see the possibility of a “meaningful” life outside of the consumption riddled nihilism that plagues the West. He advocates for those to “leave the television set with its images of consumer euphoria and go out to visit someone’s

village in the Isaan, in the favelas of Rio, the slums of Jakarta, the villages of Africa [to] discover the character, bravery, and the pride of singular people.” (77) Written in 1997 during the multicultural zeitgeist moment, Lingis encourages what we now know as “slum tourism.” His assumptions fail to account for how those in Isaan, Rio, Jakarta, or a Kenyan village might engage in a multi-directional consumerism of their own or even how global south/east mobilizations create new forms of commodity fetishism. Yet, Lingis’ ideas like Lorde’s enable anger to become a catalyst for mobilizing action, dialogue, discussion and social change.

As Meiver De la Cruz initially suggested, perhaps these comments below can be tied with some critical reading or a dance practice that responds to a particular episode. This could help our dance students, for example, develop their critical toolbox. On a different scale, work like this could also function as advisory material for institutions, media conglomerates, or funding entities who offer support for cultural and arts initiatives. In the spirit of dialogue, whether inspired by anger, advocacy, or both, we offer the following variety of comments to continue this important discussion of how seemingly innocuous cultural diversity projects (like this documentary purports to be) often undermine, and make more vulnerable, marginalised dancing communities of color who consistently labor to be political agents in their own self-making.

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Looking at *We Speak Dance* as a popular screen dance work, the things I noticed in both the show and the Bustle and Dance Magazine articles [which were put up on the Facebook post in comments section] is that Vandana Hart seems to depend very much on her own mobility and what I would call a type of myth-making around her dance persona and the way dance as a means of communication and political tool relates to that dance persona. It’s myth-making and mobility that is based on the privilege of whiteness and the means to be able to afford to travel and produce this screen dance product for Netflix. It is also based on the privilege of being able-bodied, conventionally pretty, conventionally trained, and charismatic, something she draws attention to in each episode throughout the season, when she dances

for the camera, alone, in each of the locations she chose. It can also be seen in the way that the camera constantly zooms in on her in the non-interview, group dance scenes, usually framing her in the middle of the group of dancers she worked with in each episode, exemplifying that her Western training makes her adaptable to all dances. It made me think of Raquel Monroe’s chapter “The White Girl in the Middle: The Performativity of Race, Class, and Gender in Step Up 2: The Streets,” in which Monroe argues that the ability of the white female dancer to perform black, and in the case of *We Speak Dance*, also brown, queer, and marginalised performativity serves to emphasise the white girl’s exceptionality more than actually overthrowing systemic oppression and making a political point, kind of contradicting what Hart says she wants to achieve with *We Speak Dance*. In this “dance as saviour” narrative, the focus comes to be on the white female dancer as saviour and I have so many questions.

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We Speak Dance combines several winning television formats to create what the New York Times called a ‘dance-and-travel’ series. The show rests on a well-established genre that articulates dance in terms of personal transformation - in this case, Hart’s ‘transformative ability’ to adapt to and adopt new dance moves. To this widely used metaphor of dance as self-transformation, the series adds another common trope of projecting onto dance fantasies of exoticism. In a mode reminiscent of *Eat, Pray, Love* (2010), Vandana Hart becomes native through her ability to speak dance as she hops from one country to another. Of course, this is 2018 and, as my students assure me when reading articles written twenty years ago, people no longer appropriate other cultures, at least not as naively as back then. So, old tropes are coated by a veneer of contextual specificity and quick references to current affairs and relevant, complex issues. All of this is then seasoned by Hart’s metropolitan savvy and sleek Instagram eye, which helps her move each episode through a spectrum of dance styles, from traditional to urban.

Building on Elena Benthous’ comment, I would say that the presenter’s travels and mobility are the show’s true focus. While there is nothing wrong with that, Hart’s mobility goes unquestioned (and, as Benthous suggests, this is quite different from the series’ intent to show how ‘dance unites us’ and ‘ignites change’ and, in Hart’s words, to

'showcase the marriage of dance and politics'). The constant focus on Hart's own ability to hop from one country to another and from one dance style to another re-asserts the widely circulated narrative of the extended physical and geographical mobility of Western dancers. I have written elsewhere on how modern dance techniques often feed into this narrative through discourses that posit the centrality of travel and mobility in training and through technique's implicit promise of mastering space through the moving body (2014). *We Speak Dance* seems to rest on and further feed into these discourses.

In addition to the list of privileges that Benthaus points out, I would add that Hart's mobility also depends on linguistic privilege, in other words, on English as the assumed and unquestioned mode of communication. While the show claims dance as key to intercultural communication, the presenter continuously relies on English language to travel and communicate. English also seems to be language spoken by (and expected from) most of the presenter's main interlocutors. While English language assures Hart smooth travels and encounters, it also privileges those local dancers who have the ability to speak English. To wrap up, what the show really seems to tell us is that we have to speak English in order to dance.

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Through its flippant, logocentric and universalising title, *We Speak Dance* undoes decades of dance scholarship that has worked hard to champion dance, especially from non-Western cultures, as embodied knowledge that does not need to be spoken for, translated, explained, made accessible, rationalised, mediated and co-opted by the likes of Vandana Hart. Under the guise of altruistic claims, Hart demonstrates how dance can build, energise and heal communities by immersing herself in the learning of new dance languages across different continents, cultures and cities. In this, *We Speak Dance* resorts to classic tropes of neoliberal and neo-imperial tendencies that simultaneously commodify difference and universalise the human condition as a shared quest for what ultimately manifests as a superficial embodiment of sameness. And Hart is at the fulcrum of this search for a universal condition, who, in her own learning of and transformation through these global dance forms, claims that the world can become a better place. In reality through each episode she arrives, she dances, and she departs. The worlds Hart visits carry on as they were. Nothing changes. Nothing of course would, or indeed could.

It is Hart's dancing at the end of each episode that I find the most problematic component of this documentary-style programme. Having engaged in learning a few hours of new dance languages, Hart concludes each episode by dancing out her newly acquired skills, usually filmed against the most exquisitely stereotypical backdrop of whatever location she is in. But what does her dancing achieve, if not to emphasise her dabbling with these forms as a superficial encounter with Otherness? Why does she dance through the lush green paddy fields in Bali, against the backdrop of cityscape of Beirut, perform the 'kill the mosquito step' in malaria-prone Lagos, if not to both exoticise the art forms and reduce them to accessible bite-size chunks for her predominantly white-western voyeurs? How can Hart's dancing in these contexts change the lives of the people who live within them? If, as she claims, dancing is about communities, where and how does she figure in them? It's simple, she doesn't. As Benthaus and Brazzale signal above, the guise of the 'dance saviour narrative' ultimately operates yet again as 'the white dancer as saviour' through a reliance on inherent Hart's privileges. And it is in this shift from 'dance as community' to 'dancer as tourist' that all altruistic aims disappear, and we are left with yet another instance of co-optation of bodies of colour by whiteness.

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The notion of dance as a universal language rests on the same belief in universality of white experience as much of Western philosophical thought (thinking here of Hamid Dabeshi's critique, for example). That the generic dance style expected of the back-up chorus of an American pop music idol is staged as the universal is clear from how the camera focuses on these (re-)performances, whereas all 'traditional' forms and their performers get shot in short, often fragmentary bursts that do not allow for contemplation of step sequences or corporeality of the dancers. 'Traditional forms' are not very subtly denigrated as material for modernity's emergence in the neoliberalist body of the dancer aspiring to the whiteness of the host, who can appropriate any tradition in a matter of days. For a dance historian, this recalls early twentieth-century colonialist spectacles by Denishawn or the Ballets Russes, where 'ethnographic authenticity' of the dance was often based on a few lessons (if that) adjusted to Western concert dance idiom.

From the first episode, the hierarchy between the West and the Rest is clear: “It’s the country’s first studio that gives dancers a place to train and to work as professionals in ballet, modern dance, jazz, traditional and hip hop.” In the context of this show, Western universalism produces a focus on the generic and the imitative, rather than the presumably local and diverse practices of dancing by different kinds of bodies and ethnicities. The non-white Other is relegated into the role of the Vietnamese dancer re-performing Michael Jackson’s dance moves as “the best thing in the world” for the duration of this episode. This is neoliberalist, because the dancer’s profession is defined by their performance, which is framed as fun and something they would do regardless of the conditions surrounding them, not whether they actually get paid for their labour.

It is presumptive and colonialist to assume a few lessons in Vietnamese or Finnish would make one as fluent as a native speaker; it does a disservice to all dance to assume, as the title of this series does, that an ‘ethnic’ dance can be picked up in a few lessons; and for a dance scholar, it is obvious how the body claiming to learn refuses to do so. This is not ‘we speak dance’, it is ‘we refuse to listen’.

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I second much of what has already been said (above), especially a) Benthaus’s acknowledgement of the “myth-making and mobility that is based on the privilege of whiteness”; b) Brazzale’s examination of “Hart’s ‘transformative ability’ to adapt to and adopt new dance moves”, validated by comments such as “she knows how to twerk!” and (learning tap) “she is so fast!”, and, subsequently, the “metaphor of dance as self-transformation,” where the host’s “mobility goes unquestioned”; c) Mitra’s explanation of how the series “undoes decades of dance scholarship that has worked hard to champion dance, especially from non-Western cultures, as embodied knowledge” which exempt mediation in ‘speaking for’ them (Spivak 1988), and the neoliberal/neo-imperial effort to “commodify difference and universalise the human condition as a shared quest for (...) a superficial embodiment of sameness”; and d) Järvinen’s conclusion that, ultimately, the series’ valorisation of performance, framed as “fun” despite the precarious context, both diminishes the creative/intellectual work of these artists and reaffirms their rock-bottom positionality in the hierarchical division of labour of our globalized/neoliberal economy.

At first sight, the series reminded me of *Dancing: Sex and Social Dance* (1993), a BBC2 documentary directed by Miranda Richardson, whose “World Dance” approach champions “dance as a universal human activity” across the United States, the Cook Islands and Morocco. Despite its shortcomings, the 1990s documentary advocates for social/popular dance as a lens for understanding diverse cultures and traditions, especially gendered and sexual norms, through the engagement with dance and social science scholars such as Cynthia Novack, Richard Beauvais and Kathleen Gerson. Conversely, whilst *We Speak Dance* (2018) broadcasts the power of dance as a “force for change”, it lacks the critical depth towards issues of diversity and positionality highlighted in the former. Upon closer look, it becomes clear that heteronormative whiteness, especially its worldwide mobility and accessibility, is the (real) central focus of the new series. At the end of Episode 2 (Vietnam), for instance, we hear Hart explaining that “using their traditions, Vietnamese dancers are choreographing a new conversation on gender and sexuality. It’s a conversation in perpetual motion, just like the country.” Visually, nevertheless, the voiceover is juxtaposed with an outdoors scene on a (uninhabited/romanticized) riverbank in Vietnam, whereby the host improvises a solo mash-up of Western/ingrained and non-Western/appropriated moves that amount to a choreography of coloniality. Across the five episodes, the hypervisibility of Hart’s dancing body renders the labour and heritages of cultural agents on the other side of the “Modern abyssal line” (Sousa Santos 2007) discursively invisible or otherwise irrelevant. Throughout the docuseries, the camera’s centralized focus on a white-looking, physically mobile and socio-economically enabled dancer-as-tourist seems to erase or diminish, in particular, the embodied efforts of the African peoples as well as the counter-acting power of their aesthetic and philosophical ideas, tactics and strategies cultivated across the diaspora (present in each episode), from afrobeat to tap, hip-hop styles, rapping, voguing, and MJ’s signature moves, e.g. the moonwalk.

Equally problematic is the carefully-constructed narrative treading the series, exemplified by the theses stated at the beginning of each episode. As the “former UN advisor” affirms, she is there (in Lagos) to “meet the afrobeat dancers and musicians celebrating Fela’s legacy everyday”; “meet the Vietnamese who are changing the face of their nation through dance”; “learn how the Lebanese use dance to unite a people”; “explore these Balinese traditions and their interplay with the tourism explosion affecting the island”; and, finally, “learn how Parisians elevate culture through dance”. Combined, the series’ linear trajectory

from Africa, to Asia, Middle-East, Oceania and (finally) Europe, from the precariousness of Third World slums to the apogee of high-end venues in the City of Lights, as well as its geopolitics of knowledge production, from the “meet and greet” of Other cultures to the learning about high art continue to reaffirm the “myth” of Eurocentrism and the unilateral understanding of the West as the only place, or locus of enunciation (Mignolo 2002), from which dancing may “elevate” culture.

Lastly, whilst each episode features (queer) dancing communities of colour, as Blanco Borelli points out, I find it worthwhile addressing the heteronormative sexualization of the host’s moving body across the series, through the choices of costume, makeup/grooming and camera angles (close-ups). In particular, Hart’s insistence on showing up to dance practices and events wearing pencil skirts, high heels, and/or clothes that reveal either her (bare) midriff, legs or back, or spaghetti strap blouses without a bra, seems drastically in contrast with the gender bending of the subjects she seeks to interview. Not to mention the limitations that these impractical items impose on her ability to execute a wider range of motion. At one point, one must ask: whatever happened to the exercise clothes of this “lifelong dancer”? Did the suitcase containing her sport bras and ‘yoga’ pants get extradited? Or, confirming our expectation (insightfully noted by my peers above), this is in fact a classical example of a Western/neoliberal dance-tourism enterprise centred on the (exceptionally) affluent and mobile white moving body and her never-ending quest for selfish consumption of exotic-erotic experiences of/in “dancing out there in the world” (Savigliano 2009)? Rather than wearing something that facilitates the exploration of other forms and practices, she “dresses to impress”, posing and performing for the camera (not shy of cropping and amplifying her body parts on the screen) and “celebrating” her ability to have pleasure no matter where she goes. In that sense, the final scene of the Paris episode, when the two white female dancers perform their “ballerina take over” – consisting of drinking red-coloured shots and articulating “careless” movements at a bar, and then on the streets of Paris – seems to sum it all up.

At the personal level, I can foresee the added embarrassment this series may offer to dance scholars such as myself, as we move in and out of customs checkpoints at international airports and (attempt to) explain to border control officers what it is that we do for living.

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Looking specifically at the Lagos episode, I must firstly emphasise the problematic framing of the documentary through the apt lens that Benthous has pointed out of the “white girl in the middle” (Monroe, 2014). As the issues with this frame have already been clearly articulated by Benthous and Rosa, I will not go into specific details here. I will just support this argument by adding that the continual centralisation of whiteness causes this episode to read more as a celebration of white privilege, as it is utilised to navigate ‘exotic’ black spaces, than as a legitimate investigation into those spaces and the people who live there.

Another problematic aspect of this documentary that has been raised by Järvinen and Rosa, and I wish to further highlight, is the way it attempts to minimise the labour involved in the dance. An example of this is when Hart, just five minutes into this episode, is portrayed as having ‘mastered’ Afrobeats technique. Her voiceover, “It’s my first time seeing these kinds of moves”, is edited to coincide with a close-up of her vigorously shaking her hips and performing gestures in virtuosic unison with the other dancers in the class. The scene is focused on making this first encounter appear tension-free, as Hart is pictured, almost effortlessly, performing and joyfully interacting with the other dancers. By editing out the labour that this dance requires, it perpetuates the ideology that popular dance is relatively ‘easy’ to learn, and furthermore easily commodified by the pleasure-seeking dance tourist.

The issue of Hart’s mobility, that has been discussed by Benthous, Brazzale, and Rosa is further intensified by the additional ease with which Hart seems to be able to access culturally rich dance sites and persons of interest. Just five minutes into the first episode she has already accessed movement vocabulary, teachers and sites, which others work extremely hard to access. To top this off, when she says to the dancers in the studio “I’m looking for the best dancers,” it almost sounds as though she is auditioning them, as if it is their privilege to have her there!

The closest Hart gets to self-reflexivity in this episode is when she ponders, “I wonder how my own life in the dance world would have been different without these female trailblazers [who advocated

for dance as a profession in Nigeria].” The fact that she does not contextualise the geopolitics of her positionality in relation to this statement suggests a denial of the relationship between context and identity. Her experiences as a white-looking New Yorker, although undoubtedly influenced by Africanist dance practices, cannot be positioned alongside the experiences and struggles of dancers from Lagos, without firstly recognising the differentials between these positionalities.

For this series to achieve its claimed intentions, Hart’s privileges as a global North white woman needed to be recognised and contextualised, rather than centralised through an implicit celebration of her ability to mobilise herself in order to access pleasurable experiences of embodied synchronicity with the ‘Other’.

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[I] just finished the series. Wow, [it is] troubling on so many levels, indeed. Some of the broader issues I would be interested to discuss, in addition to the unchecked mobility of whiteness, cultural "discovery"/tourism/colonialism, and self-aggrandizing that many have pointed out: the host’s brand of women’s empowerment (white, global feminism) attached to certain dance forms, i.e., cancan and pole dancing; the faux labor of her "learning" the dances, which, in most cases, presents almost instant retention of form, promoting a virtuosity, flexibility and universalizing of her "classically" trained Western body; the binaristic temporal tropes of tradition/modernization that she discursively promotes in all locations except for Paris; and [finally] this fetishistic obsession with dance as transcendence, revolution, empowerment and protest.

As Meiver De la Cruz commented to me when we were first developing this contribution, it is the validating role that Netflix, the United Nations and Vendana Hart’s white privilege endow her with that is probably the most infuriating. How can a collective of critical dance scholars hold individuals who may have the right intentions in doing dance diversity

projects (or highlighting the political potential of dance) accountable for the work they do with dancing (queer) communities (of color)? What type of labours are we expected to do as scholars and what are the limits to that labour? Is critically engaging and co-writing or collaboratively expressing our anger enough? I think about some of the established parameters for doing ethical work that incorporates dance, representation and social justice. Much of this work already exists in the thoughts, writing and practices of dance and performance scholars who are too many to name here. How do we make more accessible and visible our intellectual and political commitments? When is it not enough to get angry among ourselves?

The documentary ends with Hart participating in an ecstatic dance party in Ubud. Here, all difference is supposedly erased through the mix of dance styles under the rubric of ‘ecstatic dance.’ The entire documentary has celebrated cultural diversity yet it concludes with privileged white tourists in Indonesia who have paid to have a transcendental experience. Power relations have been made very visible without any accountability. While I do not purport to know any of Hart’s social justice commitments, I can only guess that her work with UN at some point brought to her attention the importance of becoming an ally and having solidarity with others. The impetus for the documentary makes her desire for solidarity clear. Yet, the documentary ends with her own ‘spiritual experience’ in Ubud and her pointing to some playful monkeys at a temple. I read that she hopes to make more episodes and to continue her work as a ‘dance journalist.’ I wonder what it would mean for her work to “move toward commitment rather than detachment, respect rather than selfishness, dialogue rather than exhibitionism, mutuality rather than infatuation?” (Conquergood) This would probably require a certain type of vulnerability from her. She expresses some vulnerability (and frustration) when, after struggling to learn the nuances of Balinese hand gestures, she admits “I’ve danced my whole life, but none of that is useful at all.” Well, yes. Because dance practices, no matter where they are from, require “a tireless striving for the physical details that make up cultures” (Jones, 14). No danced culture can be learned in one afternoon funded by Netflix. It requires an openness and a vulnerability to one’s own limitations among other things; a vulnerability that the Palestinian children she danced with one afternoon in Beirut know all too well.

It seems appropriate to have Meiver close our discussion as she was its intellectual instigator:

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One thing not yet addressed by my colleagues' remarks are issues of visibility and access. One of the artists interviewed in this series is my friend, artistic collaborator, and research interlocutor Alexandre Paulikevitch based in Beirut. While doing an interview with Alexandre several months after the series had been released on Netflix, he casually mentioned that he never saw it. This made me wonder how many of the artists had actually seen the footage published by Hart, and whether they could even comment on how she had edited their interviews and presented their work. This highlights the weight and power of Hart's position, and how through this power, her prior involvement with the United Nations becomes equated with a critical, political education to speak about the context and practice of global dance, *that goes on air without any checks or balances*.

I also want to invite us to think about what can this type of mediated visibility, albeit problematic, do for these artists? When the series 1st aired, Mr. Paulikevitch shared Hart's announcement on his Facebook page. He was already an internationally acclaimed and very visible artist prior to this series. In response to his public post, Hart wrote:

"Alexandre Paulikevitch you were one of the strongest dancers we featured in both movement and in mind. You are a dance leader in all the ways. I can't wait to dance with you again xo."

While likely a more than deserved compliment for my friend, I couldn't help but have a negative response to the patronizing position through which Hart allows herself to publicly rank the movement and critical thinking skills of all of the artists that she worked with across such diverse locations, circumstances, and genres.

Both of these moments clarified for me the imperative need for more public scholarship in dance studies, and the enormity of the task ahead of us in the field. But we must demand that these important conversations about power in the arts are not left to be watered down ideas filtered through white savior projects funded by multinational corporations.

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