

The Contemporary Mixtape | By Julie Potter

"I know that personality is just an invention of the news media. I know that character exists from the outside alone. I know that inside the body there's just temperature. So how do you build your soul? At a certain point, I know, you have to forget about your soul and just do the work you're required to do. To go on and on about your soul is to miss the whole point of life. I could say that with more certainty if I knew the whole point of life." – Sheila Heti, How Should A Person Be?

In anticipation of Sheetal Gandhi's *Bahu-Beti-Biwi (Daughter-in-law, Daughter, Wife)* opening the 2013 season at ODC Theater (April 19-21) in San Francisco, I'm reminded how personal hybridity and mashup identity shape our survival and presence as we move between environments and cultures. With the blurring of private and public identity encouraged by the widely accepted use of Facebook, as well as increased globalization and information sharing of the digital age, roles emerge more fuzzy than ever before.



Sheetal Gandhi. Photo by CedarBough T. Saeji.

For example, think about some freelancers you know. The titles people use to self-identify seem to include ever more hyphens and slashes: "I'm a dancer-writer-administrator -yoga teacher-etcetera..." As arts executive Ken Foster points out in his paper "Thriving in an Uncertain World," we're a culture of mashups and mixtapes – and Gandhi's art embodies this collision:

"People can, and do, hold contradictory ideas and experiences in their heads at one time. It's a level of complex thinking and perceiving that will define the 21st century. The mixtape is the narrative that arises out of

this series of mashups. It is a coherent body of work – but it defies classification by conventional measures of aesthetics, genre, or linearity. It's a hybrid creation of multiple expressions from multiple sources linked by an idea or a concept. It looks like theater, it sounds like music, it draws on mashups of pop culture and profound ideas and creates a new experience. It is the single most powerful metaphor for the contemporary world. And it is our future."

Much of contemporary hybridity emerges from having more choice than previous generations – even choice about something as fundamental as a family unit. Urban dwellers in America, many living far from a birthplace and nuclear family, adopt chosen family members. Bay Area writer Ethan Watters considers these “urban tribes” the closely-knit communities of friends that spring up during the ever-increasing period of time between college and married life.

At a time when American news outlets report low birthrates and delayed marriage, family life composes the center of Gandhi's *Bahu-Beti-Biwi*, as she navigates expectations and priorities of women in Indian culture. Regarding her artistic identity, Gandhi calls herself a choreographer-director-writer-performer (hello hyphens!). Navigating hybridity she writes in a 2009 reflection paper presented at UCLA, “I can relate with the culture of academia, Broadway actors, my Indian and Indian-American society, circus life, Chinese acrobats, and the particular preferences of each, with the same amount of ease and dis-ease.” While I believe the less shape-shifting we choose to do in the environments through which we transit, the more whole we can feel, Gandhi explores conflicting priorities as she traverses multiple spheres.



Sheetal Gandhi. Photo by CedarBough T. Saeji.

Hybridity of identity parallels Gandhi's movement hybridity, and I look forward to experiencing the calculated undulations and precise gestures she draws from her palette of Kathak, modern and West African dance layered with vocalizations and text. A student of Donald McKayle, rhythm punctuates and textures her work. McKayle deeply integrated rhythm into his dancing. Influenced by Afro-Caribbean, Hindu, and Haitian, this musicality stems from his time in the late 1940's with New Dance Group, a New York-based ensemble directed by Pearl Primus.

At the University of Irvine, McKayle encouraged Gandhi's playful nature and nurtured her capacity for rhythm. As a musician, she plays the Calabash, a dried gourd, and the West African Xylophone. To catch the shades of the North Indian form, Kathak, in her work, look for fast footwork, abrupt stops and languid symbolic arm and hand gestures. She also incorporates the polyrhythms of Ghana, where she studied in 1993.

We should also consider Gandhi's multiplicity of identities such as artist, teacher, student, traveler, circus performer and scholar, although they are less overtly represented in the work. The roles of daughter-in-law, daughter and wife, link women from around the world, although the expectations of these roles drastically differ from place to place. What does it mean to be a good daughter or wife? What roles are prioritized, and for what reasons? How do you live your hybridity? Finally, as Heti,

ponders, how should a person be? Gandhi honors her family and North Indian traditions, but urgently dances her desire to break from certain elements of her culture. In this contradictory expression, Gandhi is contemporary in her mixtape.



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