Introduction

A balding elderly man sits in front of a mirror applying dark kohl around the edges of his large eyes and across the arches of his brow. Dabbing the tip of a thin brush into a tube of red lipstick, he carefully traces the curves of his mouth and draws a teardrop shape in the space between his eyebrows. After that, he reaches over to a wig of thick black hair lying next to him and places it on his head. Then, firmly holding down the center parting, he secures it in position and nimbly weaves the hair into a long braid, adorns the parting of the wig with a glistening ornament, and fastens hanging earrings onto his ears. Pausing to assess his progress, the man looks into the mirror to see his altered reflection. The image of Satyabhama, the wife of the Hindu deity Krishna and the lead character of the Kuchipudi dance drama *Bhāmākalāpam,* looks back. In front of the mirror sits Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, a male Kuchipudi dancer skilled at donning the *strī-vēṣam,* translated here as "woman's guise." As Satyanarayana Sarma looks into his reflection to see Satyabhama, he begins to hum the lyrics to her *pravēśa daruvu,* or introductory song:

> I am Bhama, I am Satyabhama.
> I am the most beautiful Satyabhama.
> Among all 16,000 women,
> I alone stole Krishna's heart.
> I am Bhama, I am Satyabhama.[1]

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I first met Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, one of the most famous dancers from the Kuchipudi village in Telugu-speaking South India, in the summer of

2006.[2] As a dancer trained in Kuchipudi, the eponymous dance form originating from the village, I was well aware of Satyanarayana Sarma's reputation as a male Kuchipudi dancer skilled in donning the *strī-vēṣam*, particularly during the height of his career in the 1960s and 1970s. While I sat on Satyanarayana Sarma's veranda and listened to him talk on that hot summer afternoon, I was struck by the incongruity between the elderly bald man clad in a freshly pressed button-down shirt and his reputation as the living embodiment of Satyabhama, the heroine of the *Bhāmākalāpam* dance drama. All that was soon forgotten as he began to sing the lyrics to Satyabhama's *pravēśa daruvu*, accompanied by mimetic hand gestures and facial expressions (see Figures 1 and 2). As I watched Satyanarayana Sarma transform into Satyabhama, exemplifying what Dell Hymes (2015, 31) refers to as a "breakthrough" into full performance, I realized that I was witnessing a man who could impersonate Satyabhama better than me or any other woman.

    In the years following my initial encounter with Satyanarayana Sarma, I came to understand that his enactment of Satyabhama was more than an impromptu performance on the veranda of his house; it was also a paradigmatic example of the gender and caste norms of the Kuchipudi village. Kuchipudi men from a select group of hereditary brahmin families are expected to don the *strī-vēṣam* and impersonate female characters onstage, particularly the character of Satyabhama in the dance drama *Bhāmākalāpam*. According to the hagiography of Siddhendra, the founding saint of Kuchipudi dance and the purported author of *Bhāmākalāpam,* every brahmin man from a hereditary Kuchipudi family must don Satyabhama's *vēṣam* at least once in his life, a prescription that still resonates in the village today. Impersonation, the term I use to indicate the donning of a gender guise (*vēṣam*), is not simply a performative mandate for Kuchipudi brahmin men but also a practice of power that creates normative ideals of brahmin masculinity in village performance and everyday life.

    This book analyzes the practice of impersonation across a series of boundaries—village to urban to transnational, brahmin to nonbrahmin, hegemonic to nonnormative—to explore the artifice of brahmin masculinity in contemporary South Indian dance. Drawing on multisited ethnographic fieldwork and performance analysis, *Impersonations* begins with a hereditary community of brahmin men from the village of Kuchipudi in Telugu-speaking South India. Contrary to Euro-American assumptions about hypermasculinity, the Kuchipudi village presents us with a distinct understanding of normative masculinity, particularly as it relates to caste. In the Kuchipudi village, donning a woman's guise (*strī-vēṣam*) is not considered to be a subversive or unusual act; rather, impersonation enables village brahmin men to achieve normative and even hegemonic forms of masculinity in their everyday lives (Connell 1987). However, the construction of brahmin masculinity against the backdrop of impersonation is highly contingent, particularly due to the expansion of Kuchipudi in the latter half of the twentieth century from

FIGURES 1 AND 2. Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma in the village of Kuchipudi in July 2006. Photo by author.

a localized village performance to a transnationally recognized "classical" Indian dance style. While impersonation in the village is read as a powerful expression of brahmin masculinity, the very same practice is reinterpreted in urban contexts as obsolete, especially given the growing numbers of women who have begun to

learn and perform Kuchipudi dance from the mid-twentieth century onwards. In the words of my interlocutors, "There is no need for men to dance as women when women are dancing themselves." The authority of hegemonic brahmin masculinity in the village is displaced in urban and transnational forms of Kuchipudi dance, in which the brahmin man in *strī-vēṣam* comes to symbolize an outdated mode of tradition.

Impersonations examines the simultaneous construction and displacement of hegemonic brahmin masculinity in the wake of transnational change. The Kuchipudi brahmin man, much like his white heterosexual male counterpart in the West, ostensibly occupies a seat of power at the center of his societal and cultural contexts (Marcus 2005, 213).[3] As Charu Gupta (2016, 111) observes, "In India the propertied, high-caste, heterosexual Hindu male is at the top of religious and caste hierarchies, and this is taken as normal, natural, and beyond reproach."[4] Yet, this power itself is transient as broader configurations of gender and sexuality call into question the authority of the brahmin male body in *strī-vēṣam.* By shifting from village to urban and transnational forms of Kuchipudi dance, I trace the technologies of normativity that create, sustain, and undermine normative ideals of gender, caste, and sexuality through the embodied practice of impersonation in contemporary South India.

In framing my study of brahmin masculinity, I engage Mrinalini Sinha's (2012) call for a global perspective on gender that is radically contextualized. Sinha challenges long-standing Euro-American approaches to gender that link the category with the binary relationship of man/woman. Sinha (2012, 357) writes:

> While we certainly have a great deal of scholarship on women's and gender history *in* global contexts, we have not learned sufficiently from these contexts to begin to open up the concept of gender itself to different meanings. We must distinguish between merely exporting gender as an analytical category to different parts of the world and rethinking the category itself in the light of those different locations. In other words, what do these different global locations contribute to the meaning of gender *theoretically?* [Emphasis in original]

The larger point, Sinha argues, is not simply to enumerate gender in multiple contexts, but rather to analyze the theoretical implications of these contextual interpretations of gender for both feminist scholarship and feminist practice.[5]

This study extends Sinha's analysis by utilizing impersonation as an avenue for theorizing gender within a highly localized South Asian context, while also considering the transnational implications of vernacular gender performance. In my analysis of Kuchipudi brahmin masculinity, I read gender as forged at the intersection of other salient categories, namely caste and sexuality (Crenshaw 1989; Mohanty 1991; Sinha 2012). In focusing on both gender *and* caste, I am aware of the shifting axes of domination that exist across intersectional frameworks. In the

words of Sonja Thomas (2018, 8), who cites the foundational work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989): "the point of intersectionality is not to diagnose where the intersections of race, class, caste, gender, and religion are at work in India but to go back to Kimberlé Crenshaw's important critique of how certain experiences of oppression can be privileged over others in attempts at redress." Thomas calls upon a dynamic analysis of power and subordination that does not view caste, gender, and religion through a single-axis frame (9).[6] The shifting negotiations across caste and gender are apparent in chapter 5, in which I examine the experiences of brahmin women in the Kuchipudi village community.

As the primary theoretical contribution of the book, I interpret brahmin masculinity through the lens of *māyā,* a term that I translate as "constructed artifice."[7] In my conversations with performers from the Kuchipudi village, I was struck by their repeated invocation of the Sanskrit term *māyā.* Familiar with *māyā* as an Indian philosophical concept that connotes a range of meanings including illusion or artifice, I was surprised to hear Kuchipudi performers invoke the term to describe what appeared to me to be an instance of gender role-play onstage. For my interlocutors, *māyā* explains how a single performer can enact three characters through the course of the *Bhāmākalāpam* dance drama: the *sūtradhāra* (the director-cum-narrator of the dance drama), Madhavi (the female confidante of Satyabhama), and Madhava (the male confidant of Krishna). In the words of senior Kuchipudi guru Pasumarti Rattayya Sarma (translated here from Telugu to English):

> Do you know this character of Madhavi? She's a kind of *māyā.* What is *māyā?* This *māyā* is what Krishna has sent. When she comes near Satyabhama, she actually appears like a woman. But when she goes to Krishna, she becomes Madhava [a man]. The difference is clear. This is unique to Kuchipudi and is not found elsewhere.

The invocation of *māyā* was not limited to Rattayya Sarma but appeared repeatedly in my discussions with other Kuchipudi brahmin performers (see chapter 3). While I am fully aware of the problematic attempts to Sanskritize Indian dance through the invocation of Sanskrit categories and texts (Coorlawala 2004), I believe these performers were on to something by suggesting that impersonation can be envisioned as *māyā,* a term that both means illusion and eludes any single definition.

The theoretical approach to *māyā* that I put forth in chapter 3 expresses an awareness of the multiple resonances and contested history of the term in Indian textual and philosophical traditions, while also expanding its connotative possibilities beyond magic, illusion, deception, or creative power, to interrogate brahmin masculinity in its many guises. By privileging the specific context in which *māyā* is invoked, rather than its Sanskrit textual history, I reposition *māyā* as a vernacular category and address Sinha's (2012, 357) call to reframe gender by giving "theoretical weight to the particular contexts in which it is articulated." *Māyā,*

or constructed artifice, is one such example of gender theory arising from a highly localized vernacular context. Although Kuchipudi dancers may invoke *māyā* for its theological import, I reframe the term as a theoretical category to analyze the contingency of brahmin masculinity in Kuchipudi dance. The hermeneutics of constructed artifice (*māyā*) proposed here is also shaped by feminist theorizations that envision gender as a "changeable and revisable reality" (Butler [1990] 2008, xxiv). As such, the practice of impersonation paradoxically enables the construction of hegemonic brahmin masculinity, while simultaneously exposing it as artifice. A hermeneutics of constructed artifice, forged at the juncture of vernacular Kuchipudi discourse and feminist thought, prompts a critical inquiry into brahmin masculinity and its constraints.

DEFINING THE TERMS: IMPERSONATION AND *VĒṢAM*

In the South Indian language of Telugu, the primary language of many Kuchipudi dancers, the term *vēṣam* (guising) is used to indicate the practice of impersonation. *Vēṣam* (Telugu) or *veṣa* (Sanskrit) is derived from the Sanskrit root √*viṣ*. In Sanskrit, *veṣa* can mean "dress, apparel, ornament, artificial exterior, assumed appearance (often also = look, exterior, appearance in general)" (Monier-Williams [1899] 1960, 1019).[8] In the Sanskrit-Telugu dictionary *Sarva Śabda Saṃbōdhinyākhyōyam* ([1875] 2004, 877), the Telugu term *vēṣam* is translated as "dress that is unlike your real appearance." During my fieldwork, scholars and practitioners of Kuchipudi dance used the English term "female impersonation" as a translation of the Telugu idiom for taking on the *strī-vēṣam* within performance.[9] When speaking in Telugu, my interlocutors usually employed the Sanskritized Telugu term *strī-vēṣam,* as opposed to the Telugu alternative of *āḍa-vēṣam.*[10] Given the prominence of these two terms in the lexicon of my interlocutors, I will outline my usage of impersonation and *vēṣam* in the context of this study.

Drawing directly on vernacular and scholarly usages, I employ the term "impersonation" as a broad analytic category that connotes the practice of donning a gender *vēṣam* (guise) either onstage or in everyday life. Impersonation can also be expanded to indicate the temporary assumption of an identity or guise of a group which is not inherently one's own, regardless of whether this assumption is an intentional or deliberate act.[11] While impersonation may contain a negative connotation in popular English idiom (e.g., impersonating a police officer), the term lacks such semantic resonances in South Asia, particularly among my interlocutors who used it freely whenever speaking in English about guising practices. Published works on Kuchipudi and other Indian dance and theatrical forms also employ the term "impersonation" and/or "impersonator" to refer to the practice of gender guising.[12] I use the term "impersonation" to translate to a broader English readership and also to appeal to wider scholarly discourses on gender and performance beyond South Asia or the South Asian diaspora.

Notably, impersonation is a practice that appears across transnational contexts, spanning from Japanese kabuki theatre (Mezur 2005) to Javanese dance performance (Sunardi 2015) to the Shakespearean stage (Orgel 1996). Within South Asia, impersonation is ubiquitous: it is attested in a range of literary sources including Sanskrit epic texts (Goldman 1993; Doniger 2000, 2004; Vanita and Kidwai 2001), *bhakti* devotional literature (Ramanujan 1989; Hawley 2000; Pechilis 2012), and Sufi and Urdu poetry (Petievich 2008; Kugle 2013). Scholars of South Asia have noted the significance of impersonation in staged performance, particularly the practice of "female impersonation" (a male-identified performer donning a woman's guise) in Indian theatre (Hansen 1999, 2002) and dance (Pitkow 2011).[13] Also significant are the myriad forms of gender ambiguity across the South Asian landscape; spanning from premodern literary sources to contemporary performances, it is often the case that men become women, women become men, humans become gods, and ambiguous gender identities are openly described and, in some cases, valorized.[14]

Like "impersonation," *vēṣam* is also a capacious term that has theoretical significance in South Asian theatre and performance.[15] Joyce Flueckiger (2013) underscores the broad analytic potential of *vēṣam,* which she translates as "guising," as a means for recognizing everyday expressions of gender and divinity. In her study of the Gangamma *jātara* festival in the South Indian temple town of Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, the repertoire of *vēṣam*s spans from the ritual guises of the goddess Gangamma by male participants to women's application of auspicious golden turmeric (*pasupu*) on their faces (54). Flueckiger's interpretation of *vēṣam* as an analytic category extends its scope beyond men's dramatic ritual enactments of guising to include women's everyday practices. *Impersonations* focuses on *vēṣam* in a highly stylized performance or presentational context (Sunardi 2015, 13), as opposed to everyday sartorial practices, such as those found among *hijṛā* communities in urban Telugu South India (Reddy 2005).[16] Notably, the practice of donning the *strī-vēṣam* in the Kuchipudi village does not take on the same ritual significance of guising in the Gangamma *jātara,* in which male ritual participants not only take on the guises of the goddess, but also *become* ritual manifestations of her (Handelman 1994, 333). However, like the everyday guising practices of female participants of the Gangamma *jātara* (Flueckiger 2013), sartorial guising by Kuchipudi brahmin men is not simply a dramatic act onstage. Instead, the donning of Satyabhama's *strī-vēṣam* by village brahmin men engenders expressions of power, both in staged performance and in everyday village life.

In forging a connection between the terms *vēṣam* and impersonation, my objective is to ground this study in the South Asian vernacular, while also engaging broader theoretical discourses on gender and sexuality in which impersonation is a salient analytic category. Feminist theorists have expanded the scope of impersonation beyond staged performance to reimagine the theoretical possibilities of gender more broadly.[17] Esther Newton's (1979) study of drag performers, whom she

refers to as "female impersonators," is foundational to later feminist theorizations of gender, most notably the work of Judith Butler ([1990] 2008, [1993] 2011). Drawing on Newton's ethnographic work, Butler ([1990] 2008, 137) argues that drag not only parodies a particular gender identity, but also reveals the imitative structure of gender itself, as well as its inherent potential for disruption.[18] Donning the *strī-vēṣam* in Kuchipudi dance is, at the very least, functionally distinct from American drag, which can be envisioned as a parodic performance that "self-referentially draws attention to its not-quite-rightness" (Drouin 2008, 25). By contrast, guising in the Kuchipudi village is a dramatic performance that produces a stylized gender enactment onstage. That said, both practices use gender performance through sartorial guising to entertain audiences. *Vēṣam* and drag can thereby be envisioned as two culturally specific examples of the broader analytic category of impersonation. In line with the lexicon of my interlocutors and broader scholarship on Kuchipudi dance, I use the terms "impersonation" and "*vēṣam*" interchangeably in this study.

Given recent feminist scholarship, I have opted *not* to describe the practice of impersonation in gender binaries, i.e., female impersonation or male impersonation. I also do not characterize impersonation as cross-dressing or cross-gender guising because such terms presuppose that binary gender identities are being crossed through sartorial transformations.[19] I avoid the terms "transvestism" and "theatrical transvestism," which are often used interchangeably with cross-dressing in scholarship across American and South Asian performance.[20] Instead, I envision impersonation as a broad analytic category that includes not only instances of what is commonly referred to as cross-dressing or transvestism—i.e., men impersonating women and women impersonating men—but also other possibilities of guising, such as men impersonating men, women impersonating women, deities impersonating humans, and the presentation of ambiguous gender identities within narrative or performance. Nevertheless, this book is a contemporary ethnographic study circumscribed by everyday verbal discourse in which gender binaries are often directly employed or subtly invoked. Given the situatedness of this study in contemporary South India, I use gendered language—man/woman, male/female, male-identified/female-identified, and masculine/feminine—to describe the staged practice of Kuchipudi impersonation and its implications in both shaping and destabilizing constructions of hegemonic brahmin masculinity.

SOUTH ASIAN MASCULINITIES

In positing masculinity as the central focus of this study, I follow Raewyn Connell's (1995) emphasis on masculinity as an inherently relational, social practice of the body, particularly in an effort to avoid reifying Euro-American gender binaries that do not translate across global contexts (Sinha 2012). Masculinity, as Connell (2000, 10) reminds us, is a term that should be used in the plural: "We need to speak of 'masculinities', not masculinity. Different cultures, and different periods

of history, construct gender differently."[21] Connell's well-known discussion of hege-monic masculinity (1987) is equally relevant to this study. Drawing on Gramsci's (1971) analysis of hegemony, Connell defines the term "hegemonic masculinity" as the practice that enables men's dominance over women and other subordinated masculinities (183–90).[22]

In a later essay outlining the state of the field of scholarship on hegemonic mas-culinity, Connell and James W. Messerschmidt (2005, 832) put forth the following definition:

> Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially sub-ordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly nor-mative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men.

Given this definition, I use the term "hegemonic masculinity" to signify the ideal form of masculinity attainable for Kuchipudi brahmin men through the practice of impersonation. The ability to excel in donning the *strī-vēṣam* is the primary marker for achieving hegemonic masculinity for Kuchipudi brahmin men, particularly as they exert authority over brahmin women and nonbrahmin men. Yet, as I will discuss in chapter 2, only one brahmin dancer—Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma—fully embodies hegemonic masculinity in village per-formance and everyday life. Other brahmins in the Kuchipudi village adhere to standards of normative masculinity—the processual or emergent form of hege-monic masculinity—even if they fail to achieve the ideal of hegemonic masculin-ity itself.[23] For Kuchipudi brahmins, hegemonic masculinity is challenged by the presence of nonbrahmin men and brahmin women who desire to participate in performance (see chapter 5).

It is also worth noting that the category of masculinity is not a gender charac-teristic limited to the world of men (Connell 1995, 69; Chopra et al. 2004, 8–9). As Jack Halberstam (1998, 2) argues, there are many expressions of masculin-ity that exceed the male body, especially the white male middle-class body.[24] In other words, Halberstam seeks to theorize masculinity *without* men. Halberstam's decoupling of masculinity from the purview of men extends post-structuralist theorizations, which critique the presumed relationship between a prediscursive biological "sex" and a culturally constructed "gender" (Connell 1995; Butler [1990] 2008). In contemporary feminist discourse, gender is a stylized repetition of acts that conceal the processes of its very formation and, as a result, is vulnerable to disruption (Butler [1990] 2008, 190–92). In other words, masculinity, in this case brahmin masculinity, is dramatically contingent.

In focusing on brahmin masculinity, this book contributes to the burgeoning study of South Asian and South Asian American masculinities (Sinha 1995; Osella

and Osella 2006; Alter 2011; Whitaker 2011; Gupta 2016, among others).[25] Throughout this expanding body of scholarship, brahmin masculinity as a distinct gender and caste category is rarely mentioned and quite often undertheorized.[26] Considering that the brahmin male body constitutes the central focus of Hindu religious texts and practices from the Vedic period onwards, the lack of scholarship on the construction of brahmin masculinity as a performative gender and caste category is remarkable.[27] While there is a vast array of scholarship on brahminical caste status (Dumont 1980; Kinsley 1993; Chakravarti 2003; Knipe 2015; Pandian 2016), as well as analysis of the masculinity of upper-caste Hindus in the colonial period (Nandy [1983] 2009; Sinha 1995; Krishnaswamy 2011), there is a considerable lacuna of scholarship on the figure of the brahmin man in relation to his gender identity, particularly in the contemporary context.[28] Questions about brahmin masculinity, particularly as it operates in regional *jāti* groups in contemporary South Asia, remain largely unanswered. In what ways does the brahmin man attain authoritative brahminhood? How does he achieve and perform societal markers of masculinity? How does brahmin masculinity emerge in both village and cosmopolitan spaces in contemporary South Asia?

Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella (2006) address some of these questions in their ethnographic study of masculinity and manhood in a rural paddy-growing village in central Kerala. As part of their broader exploration of South Asian masculinity in relation to kinship, Osella and Osella discuss rites of passage for the brahmins of the village, including the *upanayanam,* or investiture of the sacred thread, which signifies a brahmin's twice-born (*dvija*) status (32–39).[29] For Osella and Osella's interlocutors, the *upanayanam* is followed by a three-year *brahmacārya* phase in which the initiate (*brahmacārin*) masters ritual knowledge, after which a new three-stranded sacred thread is given in the *samāvartanam* (lit., "bringing to life") ceremony.[30] Upon completion of these rites of initiation, the boy achieves the symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977) of brahminhood:

> There is a sense here of status achieved: in discourse, the boy becomes unequivocally Brahmin and masculine, utterly different from non-Brahmin men and women, including Brahmins. He is putatively the most perfect form of human being. Taking the thread is second birth, and it is what differentiates adult Brahmin males—the twice-born, the most perfect form of human beings—from the rest of society (Osella and Osella 2006, 34).

For Osella and Osella's interlocutors, mastery of ritual knowledge, particularly memorizing Sanskrit *mantra*s and performing rituals, functions as significant means for achieving the status of brahminhood.[31] The ethnographic detail provided in their account aligns, in varying degree, with other examples across India and the United States in which an expedited version of the *upanayanam* ceremony, often performed just prior to marriage, is an important marker for the

achievement and construction of brahminhood (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014, 191; Flueckiger 2015, 172–73; Knipe 2015, 142–44).

In examining brahmin communities of South India, it is also necessary to point to the scholarship of Mary Hancock (1999), Indira Viswanathan Peterson and Davesh Soneji (2008), and Kristen Rudisill (2007, 2012). Hancock's (1999) book, *Womanhood in the Making,* is a comprehensive study of Smartas, a prominent South Indian group of brahmins, which includes Kuchipudi brahmins.[32] Focusing on Tamil-speaking Smarta brahmins, Hancock (1999) argues that Smartas function as "cultural brokers" who shape discourses on national culture by occupying the dialectical position between modernity and tradition (64–67).[33] Peterson and Soneji (2008, 19) build on Hancock's (1999) work to suggest that the brahmin elites of Madras (present-day Chennai) have dominated the South Indian music and dance scene.[34] Beginning with the establishment of the Music Academy in Madras in 1928, Tamil brahmins, including E. Krishna Iyer and Rukmini Arundale, underwrote the construction of "classical" arts for middle-class consumption in urban South India (Peterson and Soneji 2008, 19–20).[35] Similarly, Rudisill (2007) posits the notion of "Brahmin taste" in relation to the field of artistic production in contemporary Chennai: "[Tamil brahmins] are truly the taste-makers of the city and both construct and embody Tamil notions of good taste" (93). Through the *sabha,* which are the voluntary cultural organizations that stage performances across the city of Chennai, Tamil brahmins use humor as the vehicle for expressing brahminical taste and cultural ideals (62).[36]

Impersonations contributes to this growing field of scholarship on South Asian masculinities and contemporary brahmin communities by focusing on the brahmins of the Kuchipudi village who use performance to craft their gender and caste identities. Kuchipudi brahmins self-identify as Vaidiki (alt., Vaidika), a sect of Telugu-speaking Smarta brahmins whose occupational practices traditionally focus on conducting priestly rituals.[37] Kuchipudi Vaidiki brahmins, like their Smarta counterparts in Tamil South India, promulgate their own vision of brahminical taste through performance. As bearers of tradition, or what is known in Telugu as *sāmpradāyam,* Kuchipudi brahmins dance to exemplify and preserve their brahminical identity. However, the shift from open-air village performance to urban theatre, particularly with the migration of Kuchipudi *guru*s to the city of Madras in the mid-twentieth century, threatens the utility of the brahmin male dancer as women take over the cosmopolitan Kuchipudi stage (see chapter 4). Building on the aforementioned studies, *Impersonations* engages scholarship on South Asian masculinities, South Indian performance, and brahmin communities to examine the simultaneous authority and fragility of brahmin masculinity in the ever-changing landscape of South Indian dance.

While this study focuses on a relatively obscure community of Vaidiki Smarta brahmin men in a South Indian village, it has bearing on broader scholarship on

caste, gender, and power. Indebted to Michel Foucault's ([1976] 1990) theorizations on power and discourse, I also take a cue from Christian Novetzke's discussions of brahmin identity in the context of precolonial Marathi literature. For Novetzke (2011, 236), the term "brahmin" is imbued with discursive power enacted in the public sphere: "the power to mediate, and to some degree control, the production of knowledge in various contexts . . . Thus, the symbolic capital of Brahminism is discursive power, whether it is literary or performative, it is the power to use language to shape society, politics and culture." The theme of brahminical authority, I argue, must be coupled with explorations of masculinity and sexuality in public performance; brahminical power, at least in the context of the Kuchipudi village, is primarily circumscribed to the purview of hereditary male dancers.

Although the brahmins of the Kuchipudi village share power and privilege like their South Indian brahmin counterparts, there are certain ways that their community is idiosyncratic, particularly when viewed against other ethnographic accounts and archival research, such as those provided by Osella and Osella (2006) and C.J. Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan (2014) in their respective studies.[38] Countering the trend of Tamil brahmin migration from village to urban settings, the brahmins of the Kuchipudi village have a vibrant *agrahāram* (brahmin quarters) occupied by many members of the hereditary families listed on the 1763 property document described in the next section.[39] Although younger Kuchipudi brahmins are moving from the village to nearby urban settings, including Vijayawada and Hyderabad, as well as abroad, their rootedness in the village has not been lost. During my fieldwork in the village, it was not uncommon to see Vedantam Venkata Naga Chalapathi Rao, a younger brahmin male performer and Vijayawada resident (at the time), traversing the streets on his motorcycle, which he frequently rode into the village to visit his family.[40] Pasumarti Haranadh, another younger brahmin man from Kuchipudi who resides in Vijayawada, commutes daily to play *mṛdaṅgam* (a barrel-shaped, double-headed South Indian drum) at the village's dance institute. Kuchipudi brahmins living abroad maintain ties to the village, often visiting on their return trips to India. By contrast, members of the older generation of the Kuchipudi brahmin community continue to live in the village, maintaining the boundaries of the brahmin *agrahāram*.

The second noted difference relates to occupation. Although Kuchipudi brahmin men undergo an *upanayanam* (thread ceremony), they do not actively engage in rituals within a temple or domestic context; these ritual obligations are set aside for Vaidiki brahmins trained in priestly duties who have migrated into the village from neighboring areas. Unlike the trends observed by Fuller and Narasimhan (2014) regarding occupational shifts of Tamil brahmins into fields such as engineering, medicine, and IT, the brahmin men of the Kuchipudi village are predominantly associated with performance.[41] I would even argue that, for the brahmin men of Kuchipudi, the *upanayanam* does not function as the critical rite of passage for marking the status of authoritative brahminhood. Instead, the significant

rite of passage for Kuchipudi brahmin men is to impersonate by donning the *strī-vēṣam* of Satyabhama, the wife of the Hindu deity Krishna and the heroine of the dance drama *Bhāmākalāpam.* The brahmins of the Kuchipudi village aspire to attain hegemonic brahmin masculinity by virtue of their ascribed brahminhood, yet the ways in which they achieve their gender and caste norms are idiosyncratic in comparison to those adopted in many brahmin communities across other parts of India.

Residents of the Kuchipudi village also vocalize distinct views on gender and sexuality. Living within the confines of a selective brahmin enclave, the brahmins of the Kuchipudi village reside, relatively, outside the boundaries of transnational discourses, debates, and practices of nonnormative sexualities (Reddy 2005).[42] Village brahmins are certainly aware of such discourses, especially given how often they engage with urban communities, particularly in the regionally proximate cities of Vijayawada, Hyderabad, and Chennai. While I can never be certain of the sexual practices of Kuchipudi brahmin men in their private lives, it is clear that these male-identified performers *publicly* situate themselves within a dominant heterosexual framework and decry any suggestion of possible effeminacy offstage. For example, most of the brahmin male performers I spoke with were married and had children, and the possibility of nonnormative sexuality was never directly broached by any of them.[43] The only hint at sexuality arose when I asked my interviewees the following question: "If you take on the *strī-vēṣam,* do you feel like a woman?" Although my question was directed toward onstage performance, all of the dancers responded by describing their offstage experiences and insisting that they only act like women onstage and never off, a point that seems to extend across other cases of gender impersonation in South Asia (Morcom 2013, 87).[44]

Impersonation in the Kuchipudi village is not simply a heterosexual practice, but a heteronormative one. Specifically, the brahmin cis male dancers who don the *strī-vēṣam* reside at the epicenter of village life and differ starkly from urban transgender *hijṛā*s or *koṭhī*s in South Asia, who are marginalized for their illicit practices of gender guising (Reddy 2005; Morcom 2013; Dutta and Roy 2014).[45] For example, nonbrahmin men who impersonate outside the village context can be interpreted as effeminate or even, in certain cases, as *hijṛā*s, a point I return to later in the book. However, within the village context, male dancers achieve a heteronormative ideal of brahmin masculinity by donning the *strī-vēṣam.* But, these claims to normativity are themselves tenuous, particularly as Kuchipudi dance spills from village to urban and transnational contexts. Kuchipudi impersonation expresses a simultaneity of possibility: it enables hegemonic brahmin masculinity within the village and is concurrently indexical of nonnormative, deviant forms of gender in cosmopolitan spaces. The convergence of these idiosyncratic expressions of gender and caste makes the Kuchipudi village and Kuchipudi dance a unique starting point to explore the construction of hegemonic brahmin masculinity and its contingencies.

KUCHIPUDI AS VILLAGE, KUCHIPUDI AS DANCE

The village of Kuchipudi is located in the Krishna district of the Telugu-speaking state of Andhra Pradesh, approximately thirty miles from Vijayawada, the closest metropolitan center (see Map 1). Like most of my interlocutors, I traveled to and from Kuchipudi by public transportation, catching the public bus at the crowded Vijayawada bus station and traveling southeast along a local highway, finally reaching the village about an hour or so later. Unlike the faster and more scenic route by car along the Krishna River, the meandering bus ride is a dusty, bumpy, and far more economical means of travel that acquainted me with the local townships of the Krishna *jilla* (district) of Andhra Pradesh. The bus driver would rarely call out stops to passengers, so I quickly learned to read the signage outside and memorize the order of the neighboring towns—Vuyyuru, Pamarru, and then Kuchipudi—after my first, rather confusing, bus ride to the village.

The public bus lets passengers off near the main crossroads of the village, which is lined with small shops and carts that sell a range of food items and knick-knacks. Walking under the main gate of the village's commercial center, one soon arrives at the Siddhendra Kalakshetra, the sprawling state-run dance institute in the village that served as my stay during my fieldwork. A short walk from the Kalakshetra is the heart of the village's *agrahāram,* or brahmin quarters, which is centered around a temple dedicated to Ramalingeshvara and Balatripurasundari, the local forms of the Hindu deities Shiva and the goddess, respectively (see Figure 3). In front of the temple is a wide platform that serves as a stage for the many open-air dance festivals hosted in the village throughout the year. Walking along the streets adjacent to the temple, one finds rows of whitewashed houses inhabited by hereditary Kuchipudi brahmin families with distinct surnames, such as Vempati, Vedantam, and Chinta. Aside from festivals days when the village is bustling with visiting dancers and their families, the *agrahāram* is relatively unremarkable and similar, in many ways, to the nearby villages and towns that one passes during the bus ride from Vijayawada to Kuchipudi. Despite its dusty, unpaved streets and rather sleepy atmosphere, this village is home to a transnationally recognized "classical" Indian dance form. Dancers across the globe, spanning from Australia to France to the United States, learn and perform Kuchipudi, even if they have never visited the birthplace of the dance form in the fertile coastal region of Andhra Pradesh.

In this section and the following section, I will explore the contentious history of Kuchipudi as both a village and the eponymous dance form arising from this village. While much of the history of Kuchipudi dance is obscured by lack of reliable records, four scholars provide the most comprehensive research on Kuchipudi to date: Arudra, Anuradha Jonnalagadda, Davesh Soneji, and Rumya Putcha.[46] Arudra's (1989, 1994) influential essays on Kuchipudi published in the arts journal *Sruti* offer scathing critiques of practitioner histories, particularly by interrogating the location of the Kuchipudi village and questioning the existence of Siddhendra,

FIGURE 3. Ramalingeshvara and Balatripurasundari temple in the center of the Kuchipudi village. Photo by author.

Kuchipudi's founding saint. Through detailed documentation of historical records and analysis of Kuchipudi's repertoire, Anuradha Jonnalagadda's extensive research (1993, 1996a, 1996b, 2006, 2016) traces the evolution of Kuchipudi from a regional performance form to a classical dance tradition, particularly through the efforts of well-known guru Vempati Chinna Satyam. Davesh Soneji's (2004, 2008, 2012) archival and ethnographic fieldwork with *devadāsī*s (courtesans) in Tamil- and Telugu-speaking South India point to the complicated relationship between Kuchipudi Smarta brahmins and *devadāsī* communities and performance.[47] His careful attention to the marginalized histories of *devadāsī*s provides an important corrective to practitioner histories of Kuchipudi dance, which overlook the significant role that courtesan women played in the construction of Kuchipudi as "classical" dance. Rumya Putcha's (2011, 2013, 2015) work analyzes the classicization of Kuchipudi dance in the mid-twentieth century, particularly in relation to the burgeoning South Indian film industry and key figures, such as Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry.[48] Indebted to and engaging the work of these four influential scholars, here I trace the transformation of Kuchipudi from a village in Telugu South India to a "classical" Indian dance tradition.
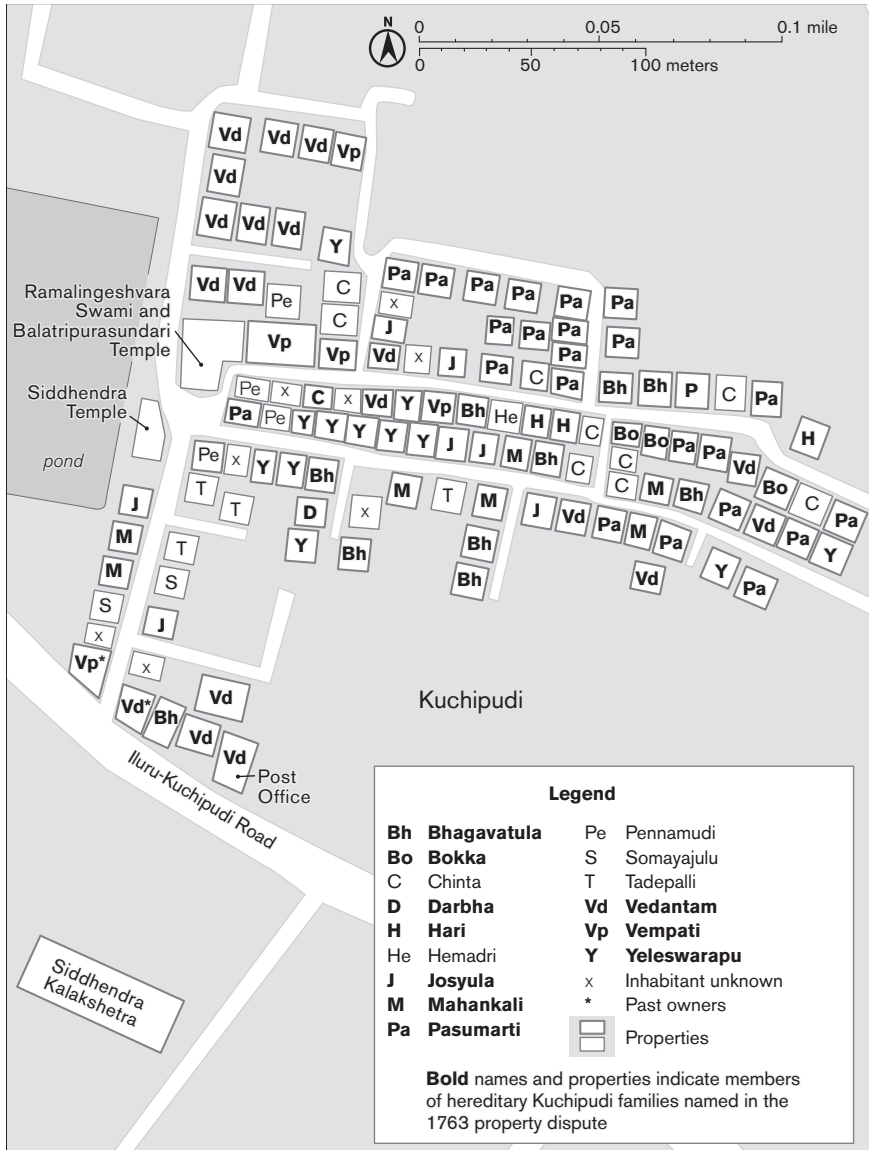
The history of the Kuchipudi village, particularly as it is described by practitioners of Kuchipudi dance, prominently mentions the gift of the Nawab of Golconda Abul Hassan Qutb Shah, also known by his Sufi name Tana Shah. It is said that in 1678, during a tour of his kingdom, Tana Shah saw a troupe of brahmin men

MAP 1. Map of India (2018). Image by Ben Pease.

performing a dance drama in the village of Kuchipudi. He was thought to be so enthralled by the performance that he gave away the village as an *agrahāram* (brahmin quarters) to the brahmin families who dedicated their lives to this art (Jonnalagadda 1996b, 39). Despite the lack of historical record of Tana Shah's gift (Arudra 1994), this story is still told in the village of Kuchipudi to this day, and it is a point of legitimation for its brahmin inhabitants, who repeatedly invoke the image of their powerful Muslim patron.

An important historical record of the Kuchipudi village is the 1763 property dispute that arose among the families living in the village at the time. Members of these brahmin families attempted to resolve the dispute legally by appealing to the Nizam, the then-current ruler, who appointed Mosalikanti Kamoji Pantulu and Kandregula Jogipantulu as his agents. A settlement was reached, and a property division document was drafted on August 24, 1763, indicating that families

MAP 2. Map of the Kuchipudi village. Image by Ben Pease.

with the following fifteen surnames were legitimate residents of the Kuchipudi village: Bhagavatula, Bokka, Darbha, Hari, Josyula, Mahankali, Pasumarti, Peddibhatla, Polepeddi, Vallabhajosyula, Vedantam, Vempati, Vemu, Venukunti, and Yeleswarapu (Jonnalagadda 1996b, 40).[49] Descendants of these families

continue to live in the village today, and many promote traditional Kuchipudi performance genres. For the purpose of this study, I use the term "hereditary," which Kuchipudi scholars and dancers also use, to designate the descendants of the surnames in the 1763 property document. There are approximately one hundred brahmin families living in the village today, and, aside from a few exceptions, most bear the surnames listed in the 1763 property document.[50] Members of these brahmin families maintain caste boundaries by residing within the village's *agrāharam* (brahmin quarters) depicted on the village map (see Map 2).[51]

Most brahmin men of this community, even those of the younger generation, are affiliated with Kuchipudi dance in some capacity, whether they are dancers known for their public performances, teachers who train students at a dance institute or home studio, musicians skilled in South Indian classical vocals or drums, or organizers of festivals and performances. Prominent dancers from the village, namely Vedantam Ramalingasastry, Chinta Ravi Balakrishna, Yeleswarapu Srinivas, and Pasumarti Haranadh, are associated with the government-run dance institute, the Siddhendra Kalakshetra, which attracts students from the village, as well as nearby urban centers. The recently established Krishna University, run by Pasumarti Keshav Prasad, also draws students to earn certificates and diplomas in Kuchipudi dance. Senior gurus, such as P.V.G. Krishna Sarma, Pasumarti Rattayya Sarma, and Vedantam Radheshyam, run dance institutes in their homes, where they offer private lessons. Aside from a few exceptions, most hereditary dance families from Kuchipudi are middle-class or, in some cases, lower middle-class. While these brahmins live in freestanding homes and carry cell phones, the income earned from dance is limited. Organizers often fail to pay dancers for their travel expenses or accommodations to and from performances, which can be a source of frustration for the brahmin male performers of the village, who are the primary earners of family income. The brahmin women of the village, who are the focus of chapter 5, generally remain inside the home and occupy their time with cooking and housework. The rigid boundaries between men's and women's occupations mirror the observations of Velcheru Narayana Rao (1991, 116) regarding Telugu brahmin households.

As already noted, the hereditary male performers from the Kuchipudi village self-identify as Vaidiki, a sect of Telugu-speaking Smarta brahmins whose occupational practices traditionally focus on priestly rituals (Jackson 1994, 207). The Vaidiki brahmin male performers who inhabit this community consider themselves the exclusive bearers of "tradition," or *sāmpradāyam.*[52] For most Kuchipudi brahmin male dancers, *sāmpradāyam* connotes the early elements of the Kuchipudi repertoire, namely *kalāpa*s and *yakṣagāna*s, which used to be performed (and are occasionally still performed) by village dance troupes. *Kalāpa*s are the earliest elements of the Kuchipudi repertoire dating to approximately the eighteenth century (Soneji 2012, 267n12). *Kalāpa*s, such as *Bhāmākalāpam,* involve approximately two

or three characters and alternate between dramatic dialogues and dance items performed by one or more characters. By the nineteenth century, the Kuchipudi repertoire expanded to include *yakṣagāna*s, which are dramatic performances that include a broader array of characters, usually heroes, heroines, and antiheroes (Jonnalagadda 1996b; Nagabhushana Sarma 2009).[53] Performances of *kalāpa*s and *yakṣagāna*s include a mixture of dance pieces interspersed with dialogues between characters, conveying a theatrical mode akin to Tamil Special Drama outlined by Susan Seizer (2005). In fact, early *kalāpa*s and *yakṣagāna*s express more drama than dance, an aesthetic feel that changed with the influence of well-known guru Vempati Chinna Satyam in the mid-twentieth century (see chapter 4).

Kuchipudi male dancers from the village are skilled at donning a wide variety of *vēṣam*s, ranging from the young girl Usha in the *yakṣagāna Uṣā-pariṇayam* to the demon king Balicakravarti in the *yakṣagāna Bhakta-prahalāda.* Among these various roles, the donning of Satyabhama's *strī-vēṣam* in *Bhāmākalāpam* is most significant because of its associations with Siddhendra, the founding saint of Kuchipudi dance (see chapter 1). In the early periods of Kuchipudi history (ca. eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), all-male troupes comprising a troupe leader, dancers, and accompanying musicians would travel to nearby villages and towns and enact *kalāpa*s and *yakṣagāna*s on makeshift open-air stages (Jonnalagadda 1996b, 43–46). With the influence of Parsi theatre from western India and the advent of modern theatrical techniques such as lighting, sound amplification, and sets, Kuchipudi performances shifted to the proscenium theatre in the twentieth century (Jonnalagadda 1996b, 46; Bhikshu 2006, 251). Despite these changes, in the Kuchipudi village today there is an outdoor stage adjacent to the Ramalingeshvara temple where most dance festivals and performances are conducted, retaining the dramatic feel of early Kuchipudi performance.

While anyone, regardless of gender or caste, can take classes at one of the village's numerous dance institutes, not everyone is encouraged to embody the traditional elements of the Kuchipudi repertoire, specifically donning Satyabhama's *strī-vēṣam.* In particular, brahmin women from the Kuchipudi village and non-brahmin men (both within and outside the village) are restricted from such traditional forms of performance in the village. In the case of the former, Kuchipudi brahmin women primarily occupy domestic roles and, aside from a few notable exceptions, rarely participate in dance. This practice of gender exclusion is justified by Kuchipudi male dancers with the following reasons: women have monthly periods that prevent them from regular performance; previously, women were not allowed to travel unaccompanied by male relatives; and journeys to performance locales are often very difficult and women cannot cope with such strenuous conditions.[54] Over the course of the twentieth century, the gender composition of Kuchipudi dance outside the village has drastically shifted, and through a number of postcolonial transformations, female dancers now dominate the Kuchipudi

stage. Although women from outside the village are now encouraged to dance, brahmin women from the Kuchipudi village continue to be excluded from public performance, a trend that I explore in detail in chapter 5.

The Kuchipudi village dance community is exclusive not only in terms of gender, but caste as well. As a point of comparison, I spoke with Ajay Kumar, a talented younger nonbrahmin impersonator and teacher from Vijayawada, the major urban center near Kuchipudi. Ajay related that although he has trained in the Kuchipudi village and even completed his MA in Kuchipudi dance at the Siddhendra Kalakshetra, the village gurus were reluctant to teach him the practice of impersonation because he does not belong to a hereditary Kuchipudi brahmin family. As a result of this reluctance, Ajay dons the *strī-vēṣam* to perform solo items and modern dance dramas, rather than enacting female characters in the traditional *kalāpa*s and *yakṣagāna*s of the Kuchipudi repertoire.[55] When such traditional dance dramas are staged in the Kuchipudi village by hereditary families, they are always enacted by brahmin men.

In the contemporary context, Kuchipudi is a transnational dance form performed by both men and women from a variety of caste backgrounds, nationalities, and even religious identities (Jonnalagadda 2008). Throughout the book, I opt to use the term "transnational," as opposed to "global," to identify contemporary Kuchipudi dance, particularly as it exists outside the village context. In doing so, I take a cue from Priya Srinivasan's *Sweating Saris* (2012), which makes a case for envisioning Indian dance as a form of transnational labor.[56] The dancers of this book (both men and women) are wage earners who straddle transnational contexts, often traveling from India to the United States and Canada over the summer to give workshops and stage performances for diaspora audiences. Likewise, the increasing popularity of online platforms such as YouTube and Skype makes it possible to take lessons and learn choreographed dance pieces within the comfort of one's own home. Even village brahmin men often travel abroad to host workshops and give performances; for example, younger brahmin dancers (and brothers) Vedantam Venkata Naga Chalapathi Rao and Vedantam Raghava now permanently reside in Canada and the United States, respectively, and return to India over summer and winter breaks, thereby reversing the flow of transnational labor.

Given these recent transformations, it may come as a surprise that within the village, Kuchipudi is still considered a brahminical and male-only dance form in which only brahmin men don the *strī-vēṣam*. The insularity of the village's brahmin *agrahāram* coupled with the expansion of Kuchipudi as a transnational dance form affords a particularly fruitful starting point to trace the transformation of gender and caste norms from village to urban and transnational spaces. The significance of impersonation in the Kuchipudi village provides a unique case study through which to examine the construction of hegemonic brahmin masculinity within a highly confined space, while tracing the contingency of gender and caste norms beyond the village.

KUCHIPUDI AS CLASSICAL

Today, Kuchipudi is nationally recognized in India as one of eight "classical" dance forms, along with Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Odissi, and Kathak, among others (Satkunaratnam 2012).[57] However, the appellation "classical" is a title bestowed on Kuchipudi in the mid-twentieth century in the wake of the Indian dance "revival" in South India. In this section, I draw on the growing body of scholarship on South Indian dance to outline the historical background that enabled the classicization of Kuchipudi and other Indian dance forms in the early to mid-twentieth century.[58] In chapter 1, I expand on this discussion to foreground the ways in which the hagiography of Siddhendra, the founding saint of Kuchipudi dance, and the role of the impersonator are dually integral to this classicization process.

Twentieth-century India witnessed immense political upheaval in the wake of the fall of the British empire, an upsurge of Indian nationalist sentiments, and the creation of a new nation-state in 1947. The nationalist push to transform India from a colony of the British empire to an independent nation-state with its own political agenda significantly impacted India's artistic and performance styles, particularly in relation to the figure of the *devadāsī*. Arthi Devarajan (2012, 1182) aptly defines *devadāsī*s as "creative and contentious figures who have worked as temple dancers, courtesans, entertainers, and key participants in social rituals, political campaigns, and diplomatic events in South Asia." In his extensive research with courtesan communities, Soneji (2012) is careful to outline the complex definitions associated with the term *devadāsī*. He notes that "today the term '*devadāsī*' is used to index a vast number of communities of women who are generally glossed by English phrases such as 'sacred prostitute' or 'temple dancer.' It collapses a number of regional practices under a singular sign, and the literal translation of the word ('slave of god') is all too often taken as a closed definition of the category" (6). The *devadāsī* women that Soneji works with in Telugu South India refer to themselves as *kalāvantulu* (lit., "receptacles of the arts").[59]

Comparable to the figure of the *satī* in colonial discourses, the *devadāsī* became the grounds upon which issues of sexuality, gender, performance, caste, and nationhood were debated and reconstructed (Spivak 1988; Mani 1998; Arondekar 2012; Soneji 2012). The anti-nautch movement against *devadāsī*s gained traction in late nineteenth-century South India, particularly through the efforts of social activists Kandukuri Viresalingam (1848–1919) and S. Muthulakshmi Reddi (1866–1968) (Viresalingam 1970, 59; Soneji 2012, 120–21; Thobani 2017, 31). In 1927, Reddi, the first female doctor in the Madras Presidency, drafted a resolution to the Madras Legislative Council that critiqued the practice of dedicating *devadāsī* girls to temples (Soneji 2010, xxi). Reddi's recommendations materialized into legislation, namely "A Bill to Prevent the Dedication of Women to Hindu Temples" in 1930 and "Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947," the latter of which criminalized the dedication of a girl to an image or deity in a temple (Soneji

2010, xxi; Soneji 2012, 119–23). *Devadāsī* dance continued in nontemple contexts until 1956 when an amendment to the 1947 act banned *devadāsī* dancing at marriages and other social occasions, thereby ending public *devadāsī* performance altogether (Soneji 2012, 191). Nonetheless, the embodied memory and ritual significance of *devadāsī* women has continued into the contemporary period, as evident in the ethnographic accounts of Soneji (2012) and Lucinda Ramberg (2014).[60]

In conjunction with the anti-nauch movement in the early twentieth century, dance performance in Tamil-speaking South India witnessed a "revival" as "the hereditary community of devadasi dancers was replaced by a new community of upper-caste dancers" (Allen 1997, 65). Traditional *devadāsī* performers did not fit into the elite nationalist vision of "classical" Indian dance and were therefore replaced by middle-class and upper-caste (mostly brahmin) women dancers who abandoned the erotic (*śṛṅgāra*) repertoire for less sexually suggestive themes (Meduri 1988; Allen 1997). *Devadāsī* dance was renamed from *sadir* to Bharatanatyam (lit., "the dance of Bharata"), which clearly forges connections with Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* and a presumed glorious Hindu golden age (Allen 1997, 79; Putcha 2013, 96).[61] *Devadāsī* dance became the basis for the first nationally recognized "classical" Indian dance form, Bharatanatyam, while the *devadāsī* herself was all but forgotten (Meduri 1988, 6).

Alongside the development of anti-nauch reform, the establishment of institutions such as the Music Academy (est. 1928) prompted what became known as a dance "revival" in colonial South India (Allen 2008). As Matthew Harp Allen (1997, 63–64) succinctly describes:

> The term "revival" is a drastically reductive linguistic summary of a complex process—a deliberate selection from among many possibilities—which cries out to be examined from more than one point of view. While the "revival" of South Indian dance certainly *involved* a re-vivification or bringing back to life, it was equally a re-population (one social community appropriating a practice from another), a re-construction (altering and replacing elements of repertoire and choreography), a re-naming (from *nautch* and other terms to *bharata natyam*), a re-situation (from temple, court, and salon to the public stage), and a re-storation (. . . a splicing together of selected 'strips' of performative behavior in a manner that simultaneously creates a new practice and invents an historical one). The discourse on South Indian dance has to date privileged the term "revival" over other equally descriptive ones, obscuring the complexity of the process, focusing attention onto a simple, celebrative vision of the giving of new life.

Integral to the so-called South Indian "revival" of *devadāsī* dance were the efforts of Tamil brahmin dancer Rukmini Arundale. Inspired by the Orientalist leanings of the international Theosophical Society, Arundale repackaged courtesan performance to suit elite middle-class and upper-caste sensibilities and resanctified the stage as the temple. In Bharatanatyam, Arundale sought to construct a dance

repertoire that rivaled Euro-American classical dance, while departing from traditional solo *devadāsī* performance (Peterson 2011/12, 26). Arundale's dance institution, the Kalakshetra (established in Madras in 1936), became the veritable locus for a Bharatanatyam empire that reshaped the trajectory of all Indian dance forms for decades (Meduri 1988; Allen 1997). *Devadāsī* performers, by comparison, were disenfranchised and overtly excluded from the performative sphere. They became, in the words of Srinivasan (2012, 151–52), the hidden laborers of Indian dance, akin to the contemporary weavers and sari salesmen whose embodied labor (or memory of embodied labor in the case of the *devadāsī*) is overlooked and ultimately forgotten during the moment of public performance. In other words, the "*devadasi* were thus rudely dismissed, while the dance itself, like the mythical phoenix, rose from the ashes" (Meduri 1988, 6).[62]

The ostensible revival and performative repackaging of the *devadāsī* repertoire into Bharatanatyam catapulted a national transformation of the Indian arts scene. Mid-twentieth-century dancers and scholars began to employ the language of "classical" Indian dance, an appellation given to dance forms grounded in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (ca. fourth century CE) and other Sanskrit manuals on dramaturgy and the arts. In the words of Kathak dance scholar Pallabi Chakravorty (2010, 276):

> During the nationalist phase in the early twentieth century, the revival of Indian classical dance came to be associated intimately with the construction of India's national identity. The concept of a common heritage provided an umbrella under which all the different regional dance styles were assembled. The dances came to embody the 'spiritual' roots of the past.

In the process of Sanskritizing Indian dance, the technical elements of Sanskrit aesthetic theory merged with the philosophical commentary of Abhinavagupta (ca. eleventh century CE) to uplift "classical" dance from dramatic art to ultimate spiritual experience (Meduri 1988, 8; Coorlawala 2004, 53–54). Today, the path forged between Indian classical dance and religion is encapsulated in the phrase *bhakti rasa,* a term that describes a heightened aesthetic mood for "experiencing a moment of intimate connection deepening the relationship between a devotee and the divine that is embodied on stage" (Zubko 2014a, 2).[63] The coupling of dance with the discourse of *bhakti* further theologizes Bharatanatyam as a religiously based upper-caste dance form, while also distancing it from the more sensuous performance repertoire of *devadāsī* dancers.[64]

Notably, Soneji (2012) reminds us that the success of "classical" Indian dance is still palpable for contemporary *devadāsī*s despite anti-nautch legislation. He writes:

> Women in contemporary *kalāvantula* communities reflect on loss and aesthetics in a manner that takes, for example, the success of "classical" Indian dance, cinema dance, and other elite cultural practices into account; these provide the foil for their own experiences. Their narrations reveal an acute awareness of their social location

outside the middle class and enable them to mark their fractured identities within a historically determinate framework. (221)

For Soneji's interlocutors, performance serves as a form of "reflective nostalgia" that allows them to both embody and remember an untenable past (214).

In the years following the ostensible "revival" of dance and music in Tamil South India, elite scholars and patrons from Telugu South India proposed their own version of "classical" dance that rivaled the status of Bharatanatyam in Tamil Nadu. Among the various regional dance styles of Telugu South India, Kuchipudi was selectively chosen and promoted on the national stage and soon became synonymous with the category of "classical." Soneji (2012, 201) notes that "nationalists and elite philanthropists in Andhra Pradesh accorded a parallel status to a reworked version of the *smārta* Brahmin male dance tradition from Kuchipudi village, and not to the dance of the *kalāvantulu*." As both Soneji (2012) and Putcha (2015) argue, Kuchipudi paradoxically became a classical Indian dance tradition in the twentieth century through the simultaneous inclusion and erasure of *devadāsī* identity.

Although rarely mentioned in Kuchipudi circles today, it is evident that Kuchipudi brahmins frequently interacted with and borrowed from *devadāsī* dancers (Appa Rao 1958; Putcha 2013).[65] One of the most influential figures responsible for reshaping Kuchipudi dance through the framework of *devadāsī* performance is Kuchipudi village brahmin Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry (1886–1956). Most Kuchipudi dancers and scholars credit Lakshminarayana Sastry for transforming Kuchipudi from an ensemble, exclusively male theatrical tradition (*nāṭyamēḷam*) to a solo dance style featuring female dancers (*naṭṭuvamēḷam*) (Jonnalagadda 1996b, 47 and 2016, 1067; Shah 2002, 133; Putcha 2015, 9). What many Kuchipudi dancers and scholars fail to recognize is that this reframing of Kuchipudi dance is a direct result of Lakshminarayana Sastry's engagement with *devadāsī* performers. As Putcha (2015, 12–13) argues: "At a time when *kuchipudi* repertoire revolved around theatrical ensemble genres, Sastry fashioned a solo repertoire, most likely based on interactions with female dancers and in the spirit of oriental dance popularized by contemporaries such as Uday Shankar (1900–1977)." The effects of Lakshminarayana Sastry's efforts are enormously influential on Kuchipudi as it is practiced today; most solo dance pieces performed by contemporary Kuchipudi dancers are a direct byproduct of Lakshminarayana Sastry's efforts in repackaging solo female dance.[66]

Another important factor in the classicization of Kuchipudi was the state-based performing arts organization Andhra Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi (APSNA), established in 1957, just one year after the creation of the newly named Telugu-speaking state of Andhra Pradesh (Jonnalagadda 2006, 271).[67] In 1958, the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi (the national branch of APSNA) organized an All-India Dance Seminar in New Delhi. Vissa Appa Rao, a notable Telugu scholar and Niyogi

brahmin, and Maranganti Kanchanamala, an English-educated female student of Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry, were sent as delegates from Andhra Pradesh to attend the seminar as representatives of Kuchipudi dance (Putcha 2013, 91). Despite the fact that both Appa Rao and Kanchanamala were not from the class of hereditary brahmin dancers from the Kuchipudi village, they were sent as representatives of Kuchipudi dance on account of their ability to speak in English and converse with non-Telugu audiences (Putcha 2013, 101).[68] According to Kuchipudi public memory, the 1958 seminar failed to acknowledge Kuchipudi as a "classical" dance tradition when dancer Kanchanamala was relegated to performing in a daytime slot and the stalwart Bharatanatyam guru Rukmini Arundale referred to Kuchipudi as a subset of Bharatanatyam (Jonnalagadda 1996b, 48 and 2016, 1063; Putcha 2013, 94). Slighted by the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi, proponents of Kuchipudi publicly announced its classical status the following year (1959) in the "Kuchipudi Nritya Sadassu" (Seminar on Kuchipudi Dance) hosted by APSNA. These two successive seminars—1958 and 1959—function as critical historical markers for the formation of Kuchipudi as classical dance, a point that Putcha (2013) explores further in her work.[69]

The attempts to classicize Kuchipudi did not end with the 1958 and 1959 seminars but continued in subsequent years as Kuchipudi practitioners and proponents worked to popularize the dance form and expand its reach beyond Telugu South India through the auspices of APSNA. In 1959, All India Radio in Vijayawada recorded several Kuchipudi dance dramas, including *Bhāmākalāpam* (Jonnalagadda 2016, 1064). In October 1960, APSNA initiated a tour of a troupe from the Kuchipudi village led by Kuchipudi artist Chinta Krishna Murthy and managed by Telugu brahmin Banda Kanakalingeshwara Rao (Jonnalagadda 2016, 1063). The tour included performances in Madras, Tanjavur, and Madurai (all urban centers in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu) and incorporated elaborate explanations of the history and legacy of Kuchipudi by Kanakalingeshwara Rao.[70] Following the success of the tour, APSNA, encouraged by Kanakalingeshwara Rao, established the Siddhendra Kalakshetra in Kuchipudi in 1961 and satellite institutions in urban centers across Andhra Pradesh (Jonnalagadda 2016, 1064).[71] APSNA was dissolved in 1983 and replaced by Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University in 1985, which in the following years took over the Siddhendra Kalakshetra in the Kuchipudi village and significantly expanded its syllabus (Jonnalagadda 2006, 272–73; 2016, 1069). Today, students can earn various degrees in Kuchipudi dance, including a diploma, certificate, MA, and PhD, at the Siddhendra Kalakshetra, which is a satellite campus of Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University in Hyderabad, Telangana. The institutionalization of the dance form in recent decades has been further buttressed by the commercialization of the village through state- and locally sponsored arts festivals. Now a tourist destination for visitors from all over the world, the Kuchipudi village is recognizably home to Kuchipudi "classical" dance.[72]

The emergence of Kuchipudi as a "classical" Indian dance tradition was an iterative process that occurred during the years leading up to and following the creation of the Telugu-speaking state of Andhra Pradesh (Shah 2002). The formation of the state-level arts organization APSNA, coupled with the efforts of elite brahmin proponents such as Banda Kanakalingeshwara Rao, propelled Kuchipudi as "classical" Telugu dance into the national limelight. Additionally, the repackaging of the solo female dance repertoire by Kuchipudi guru Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry and the prominence given to middle-class and English-educated female dancers like Kanchanamala paved the way for a cosmopolitan vision of Kuchipudi dance beyond the village (Putcha 2013). In the mid-twentieth century, Kuchipudi dancers and proponents publicly asserted the significance of Kuchipudi as classical dance and not simply an obscure geographical locale. Mirroring and competing with the dance "revival" of Bharatanatyam in Tamil Nadu, Kuchipudi became *the* dance form of Telugu South India and one of the classical dance traditions of the nascent Indian nation-state. As the works of scholars Arudra, Jonnalagadda, Soneji, and Putcha demonstrate, any discussion of Kuchipudi as dance needs to be preceded by a careful interrogation of Kuchipudi's contentious past. And, as I will argue in chapter 1, the hereditary brahmin men of Kuchipudi's *agrahāram* are important players in the classicization of Kuchipudi dance, particularly on account of the practice of impersonation. The brahmin male body donning a woman's guise became the central script for fashioning Kuchipudi into a nationally recognized "classical" Indian dance form.

DANCING IN THE FIELD

"You don't move like one of us," said a voice from behind me as I walked from the Siddhendra Kalakshetra's main building to the adjacent dormitory after a morning dance class. The voice belonged to Pasumarti Haranadh, the *mṛdaṅgam* player at the dance institute who became a close contact during my stay in the village. Startled by his direct assertion, I asked him to explain why—what made me so different? Hari, as he is commonly known, responded simply by saying that he had watched me rehearse Satyabhama's *pravēśa daruvu* in class that morning, and my movements seemed out of sync. Although exasperated by this assertion, I had to admit that he was correct; there was something about Satyabhama's character that I could never quite capture, whether it was in the dance halls in the Siddhendra Kalakshetra or in a back room of the Hindu Temple of Atlanta, where I first learned the piece from my teacher, Sasikala Penumarthi, nearly fifteen years earlier. Satyabhama's lilting walks and proud looks always seemed to elude me in the moment of performance, and I could never discipline my body to enact her character to the satisfaction of my teachers, either in the United States or in India.

In her work on transnational Indian dance, Priya Srinivasan (2012) raises the concept of the "unruly spectator" that helps to reframe my failure in performance. In first-person voice, Srinivasan (2012, 8–9) writes:

> In one respect, my body is involved in the research through the act of practicing the dance and through my kinesthetic responses to the information gathered. In another respect, I am restless as I find it imperative to unpack multiple points of view to reveal Indian dance within a broader political economy. For these reasons, throughout the book, I participate as the "unruly spectator." The unruly spectator offers a feminist perspective on spectatorship and takes an active role in uncovering the ways that power can be negotiated by examining dance mistakes such as a slipping sari, a bleeding foot, or sweaty sari blouses.

Envisioning Hari's comments through the lens of the "unruly spectator" allows me to rethink my performance of Satyabhama's *pravēśa daruvu;* perhaps the reason that I could never quite capture Satyabhama's gait or glances is not entirely due to a failure in my skills in dance, but rather on account of a restriction placed on the character herself. From the start of Kuchipudi's contentious past, Satyabhama has always been envisioned through the brahmin male body, thereby delimiting the female dancer from ever fully inhabiting her character. As I was told repeatedly by my interlocutors, to see Satyabhama in performance, one must watch the brahmin male body in *vēṣam.*

I begin with this vignette to note that dancing in the field, however unsuccessfully, serves as an underlying ethnographic method in this study, thus in line with a host of scholars who both study and embody Indian performance.[73] Having participated in dance classrooms in India and the United States since 1997, I am deeply familiar with the profuse amounts of sweat that dance labor entails, particularly in the muggy context of Chennai, which often drenches the sari *and* the sari blouse in sweat (Srinivasan 2012). Although I do not often insert myself as the "unruly spectator," in the manner of Srinivasan, to read and disrupt the performances around me, my familiarity with disciplining my body in dance and very often failing at this disciplinary practice undergirds my analysis in this book.

In fact, dancing was my primary entrance into the field. Sidestepping the initial embodied awkwardness of fieldwork underscored by Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold (1994) and Tulasi Srinivas (2018), I was able to build relationships with my interlocutors by dancing in their classrooms. This choice, however, was not simply a utilitarian avenue of introduction; rather, dance became the means to attain what Deidre Sklar (1994) refers to as *kinesthetic empathy.* Sklar defines kinesthetic empathy as a method of qualitative movement analysis that builds the "capacity to participate with another's movement or another's sensory experience of movement" (15). In the context of my fieldwork, dance became my avenue to kinesthetic empathy. It is by dancing that I was able to participate with

and sometimes even against the stories and histories of the dancers who fill the pages of this book.

Building on Sklar's notion of kinesthetic empathy, I specifically requested to learn to dance *Bhāmākalāpam,* the hallmark dance drama of the Kuchipudi brahmin male tradition. In every dance classroom, whether at the University of Hyderabad campus, the Siddhendra Kalakshetra in the village, or the Kuchipudi Art Academy in Chennai, I learned bits and pieces of the *Bhāmākalāpam* dance drama, ultimately learning the entirety of Satyabhama's role by the end of my fieldwork stay. The goal was not to excel in performing Satyabhama, which is difficult for most dancers in India and an impossibility for an American-raised South Asian woman (Devarajan 2011). Rather, the point was to move beyond "objective" observation to project myself into another's moving body (Sklar 1994, 15). By learning both the movements and the dialogues of *Bhāmākalāpam,* "I put my body on the line while training and otherwise engaging other dancers" (Srinivasan 2012, 18). Even in moments when I failed in dance (or perhaps dance failed me), such as the vignette mentioned previously, I built my capacity for kinesthetic empathy; as any dancer knows, failure is a certainty in both practice and performance.

There were several instances, however, in which dance stepped in the way of my "real" work. In the Kuchipudi village, for example, I was interrupted in the middle of a recorded interview to dance an item for a large group of Scandinavian tourists who were visiting the Siddhendra Kalakshetra. On another occasion, I was asked by the principal of the Siddhendra Kalakshetra to abandon my weekend interview plans and travel by train with his troupe to Bengaluru to perform. Another time, I was asked to video-record basic Kuchipudi movements with the principal's eleven-year-old son for a dance teacher visiting from the United States. While frustrating at the time, in hindsight, these interruptions were integral to building my relationship with the Kuchipudi community and gaining insight into the world of dance beyond the interview context. Notably, this method of performance ethnography permeates the interdisciplinary fields of dance studies, ethnomusicology, and the anthropology of sport.[74] As a dancer-ethnographer, I combine performance analysis and ethnographic method to analyze the practice of impersonation in the context of the Kuchipudi village and in transnational Kuchipudi dance. While I do not always foreground my dancing body, my experiences of dancing in the field inform my analysis of Kuchipudi as village and Kuchipudi as dance.

To be clear from the outset, this study is not an ethnography of a single village in the manner of many seminal ethnographies of South Asia (Gold 2000; Prasad 2007; Flueckiger 2013). Rather than spending my entire fieldwork stay in the Kuchipudi village, I chose to divide my time among three separate fieldwork sites—Hyderabad, the Kuchipudi village, and Chennai—because the historical trajectory of Kuchipudi dance brought me to these locales. I conducted fieldwork from 2009 to 2010, followed by several return visits to all three sites over the

following eight years (2010–18).[75] During this time, I interviewed approximately forty Kuchipudi dancers and scholars, in addition to conducting archival research at the Sangeet Natak Akademi archives in New Delhi. Most of my interviews with Kuchipudi dancers were conducted in Telugu. In the chapters to come, all direct quotations from interviews are translated from Telugu to English unless otherwise noted. Alongside formal interviews, I observed, recorded, organized, and participated in several Kuchipudi performances.

Initially, I conceived the project as an ethnography of the village, particularly focusing on the village's community of brahmin male dancers. However, after beginning fieldwork, it quickly became clear that staying within the boundaries of the village would paint a lopsided picture of Kuchipudi dance by reifying the authority of Kuchipudi brahmin men over and above all the other dancers across the globe who describe themselves as Kuchipudi artists. In choosing to move beyond the village to urban sites of Kuchipudi dance, including Chennai, Hyderabad, and Atlanta, I observed both the authority and contingency of Kuchipudi brahmin masculinity, which is challenged through the expansion of Kuchipudi as a transnational dance form. The shift from village to urban and transnational enabled me to envision a broader geography of masculinities in which the hegemonic masculinity of brahmin men on the village stage is displaced in global contexts (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 849). Consequently, this book is a multisited ethnographic study of practice, particularly as the practice converges and disrupts the legacy of normative and hegemonic forms of brahmin masculinity in Kuchipudi dance.[76]

The material analyzed here, especially in chapters 2, 3, and 4, arises from *Bhāmākalāpam* performances in Hyderabad and Atlanta that I organized and in which I participated. In January 2011, I collaborated with Hyderabad-based dance scholars Anuradha Jonnalagadda and Modali Nagabhushana Sarma to stage a three-day symposium on *kalāpa* traditions. The symposium included performances and lecture-demonstrations by artists from the Kuchipudi village, courtesan communities from coastal Andhra Pradesh, and Turpu Bhagavatam performers (a regional theatrical style from Vijayanagaram that also performs *Bhāmākalāpam*).[77] In September 2011, I organized a performance of *Bhāmākalāpam* at Emory University performed by Sasikala Penumarthi, an Atlanta-based artist trained by Vempati Chinna Satyam, and Vedantam Raghava, a Dallas-based guru whose family is from the Kuchipudi village. While I attended dozens of performances during my fieldwork in India, the pictures reprinted in the book are based on the performances I organized and had explicit permission to photograph and record. Given the public nature of Kuchipudi performance, I also requested permission to include the real names of all the dancers quoted and pictured in this book.

The politics and privilege of caste also frame my fieldwork experiences. During my initial encounters with the brahmin inhabitants of the Kuchipudi village, the

first question usually posed to me regarded the issue of caste. Unable to distinguish my caste from my style of dress or surname (*iṇṭipēru*), my village interlocutors usually posed the question in a fairly straightforward manner: "Are you one of us?" (Telugu: *mana vāllā?*). I was first asked this question during my introductory meeting with the principal of the Siddhendra Kalakshetra, the village's dance institute that served as my home during my fieldwork stay. Seeing my apparent confusion at what seemed to be a simple question—"Are you one of us?"—the principal began to laugh. A student standing in the doorway framed the inquiry more clearly, "Are you Vaidiki or Niyogi?" It suddenly dawned on me that the question was not simply about community or belonging, but a question of caste, one that had never been directly posed to me in urban dance settings, either in India or the United States. Although irritated by his direct inquiry and deeply conscious of the long history of patriarchal and caste-based oppression that comes with my brahmin status, I was forced to answer truthfully: "Yes, I am one of you." As the daughter of a Vaidiki father and Niyogi mother, I was aware of the long-standing rivalry between these Telugu sectarian brahminical groups and thus quickly decided to identify as Vaidiki in an attempt to integrate myself with my Vaidiki interlocutors.[78] Upon hearing of my caste affiliation, and specific subcaste, my questioner relaxed at the thought that I was, indeed, one of them.[79]

I feel a deep-seated discomfort that my acceptance into the Kuchipudi village was based, in part, on my privileged status within the folds of the Vaidiki brahmin community. Given my interactions with the brahmins of the Kuchipudi village, I would argue that their willingness to answer my questions, support my research, teach me dance, and feed me as one of their own would not have been possible if my caste had been different. Although it is not my intention to imply that I would have been treated poorly if my caste status had been different, my caste identity was an important factor that legitimized my presence as an "insider" during the course of my ethnographic fieldwork, a point documented by other brahmin scholars working with brahmin communities (Prasad 2007, 23; Fuller and Narasimhan 2014, 24–25; Putcha 2015, 21).[80] My caste alignment allowed me to partake in a position of privilege *along with* my interlocutors. While there is no way to circumvent this privileged status, I take a cue from the work of Ayesha Chaudhry (2017, 26) to center my own positionality among my brahmin interlocutors in order to divest myself from my own privilege.[81]

Despite my seemingly insider position, I present a critical history of impersonation and brahmin masculinity in Kuchipudi dance from the mid-twentieth century to the present context. The methodologies of this book reflect the paradoxical dialectic of the scholar of dance who must struggle with the inherited histories of the very dance form she both critiques and embodies. I must contend with my own intersecting identities as Kuchipudi dancer, Telugu Vaidiki/Niyogi brahmin woman, and American scholar, while simultaneously divesting power from the narratives, traditions, and discourses I have learned to embody (Chaudhry 2017, 27). In raising these questions of dancing in the field, I hope to mark the

unsettling disquiet of critiquing the very dance form that grounds my embodied knowledge and shapes my aesthetic insights.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The chapters of this book are progressively arranged: the earlier chapters establish the power of hegemonic brahmin masculinity in the Kuchipudi village, while the later chapters expose its contingency in village, urban, and transnational forms of Kuchipudi dance. The book begins in the Kuchipudi village, focusing on its hereditary community of upper-caste brahmin men who are expected to don the *strī-vēṣam* to impersonate characters from dance dramas based on Hindu religious narratives. In the first chapter, I trace the role that impersonation plays in the constructed genealogy of Kuchipudi as "classical" dance. Addressing a long-standing lacuna in scholarship on Indian dance, I argue that the dancing male body is integral to the classicization of Kuchipudi as distinct from other "classical" dance forms, namely Bharatanatyam. By examining instances of vocal guising in the narrative of Siddhendra, the founding saint of Kuchipudi dance, and sartorial guising in Kuchipudi performance, the chapter analyzes the mechanisms by which the brahmin impersonator came to occupy center stage.

In the second chapter, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork and performance analysis to examine the practice of impersonation in the contemporary Kuchipudi village, as well as urban and transnational spaces. Focusing on the case of well-known impersonator Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, I argue that impersonation appeals to a brahminical tradition of authority (*sāmpradāyam*) that sanctions village brahmin men, while excluding all others from performance. Impersonation onstage spills into personation offstage as Kuchipudi brahmin men don the *strī-vēṣam* to achieve normative and even hegemonic masculinity both in village dance performance and everyday life.

The picture of brahminical authority painted in the opening chapters is questioned in the second half of the book, particularly through the introduction of the seminal theoretical concept of constructed artifice (*māyā*). Chapter 3 analyzes the village enactments of the *vidūṣaka* (clown) character Madhavi, who parodies the constructed artifice (*māyā*) of brahmin masculinity through comedic gesture and verbal discourse. Chapter 4 explores the intersections of sexuality and impersonation, particularly how the sexually ambiguous enactments of Madhavi in urban and transnational performance interrogate the heteronormative framework underlying the artifice of brahmin masculinity. Chapter 5 foregrounds the voices of village brahmin women who are marginalized from Kuchipudi dance by their brahmin male counterparts.

Like any ethnographic study, the material analyzed in this book is temporally limited in that it reflects a snapshot of the Kuchipudi village's brahmin community from a selective period of time, in this case 2009–18. Through the course of writing

this book, many performers and scholars have passed away, including Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, whose enactment of Satyabhama's *pravēśa daruvu* is featured in the opening of this introduction. The death of these interlocutors, the shifting trends in Kuchipudi performance, and the urbanization of the areas around the Krishna district, among a host of other factors, will invariably change the landscape of the Kuchipudi village in the years to come. Despite its temporal constraints, *Impersonations* asks perennial questions, such as: Which bodies get to dance and why? And, what happens when brahmin men dance? In thinking through the intersection of gender, caste, and performance, I envision constructed artifice (*māyā*) as a theoretical category to examine not only the contingency of brahmin masculinity in the Kuchipudi context, but also the mutability of gender and caste norms across South Asia. A hermeneutics of constructed artifice is not simply gender theory arising from vernacular context, but rather aims to articulate a truly global perspective on gender in its many *vēṣam*s (guises).