

Conclusion

Rewriting the Script for Kuchipudi Dance

When I returned to the Kuchipudi village in July 2018, I found the grounds of the Siddhendra Kalakshetra buzzing with activity. A group of dancers were gathered on the front steps of the sprawling concrete building, gossiping in Telugu and sipping chai from white paper cups. Taking off my shoes and adding them to the piles of sandals scattered across the ground, I nervously walked inside and looked around expectantly for the familiar faces of the brahmin men—Vedantam Ramalingasastry, Yeleswarapu Srinivas, Chinta Ravi Balakrishna, and Pasumarti Haranadh—who normally conduct classes at the Kalakshetra. Used to being one among a handful of students during my fieldwork, I was surprised to see each classroom filled with hundreds of dancers, both men and women, their clothes dripping with sweat from the morning classes.

In the front dance hall, I found Chinta Ravi Balakrishna, a younger brahmin teacher, seated on a raised platform. Ravi Balakrishna's voice, amplified by the microphone in front of him, resounded across the room as he chanted out the syllabic beats for the *caturasra-jatis*, the combination of basic steps set to a four-beat time-measure, *ta-ka-dhi-mi*. Ravi Balakrishna's face broke into a wide smile when he saw me, and he beckoned me onto the platform. "We're running a three-day training for Kuchipudi teachers from all over the state of Andhra Pradesh," he said enthusiastically. I explained that I needed his signature to include his picture and interview in the book I was working on, and he readily agreed, even announcing my research project to the room of dancers before me. Reluctant to interrupt the class further, I watched from the front of the room as the rows of dancers practiced the movements in alternating batches.

As I wandered from room to room, I found the same setup: a brahmin male dance teacher seated in the front of the room, his voice amplified by a microphone, teaching basic steps and combinations of steps to rows of dancers drenched in sweat. In all the rooms, the movements were familiar; in fact, they were the exact same steps taught to me by my Atlanta-based dance teacher, Sasikala Penumarthi, who had been trained under Vempati Chinna Satyam at the Kuchipudi Art Academy (KAA) in the 1980s. Aside from some minor variations, the steps were also the same as those I had danced in institutes in urban India, including at the KAA in Chennai, the Kuchipudi Kalakshetram in Vishakapatnam, and Baliakka's classroom in Hyderabad.

Given the controversies of Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam*, discussed in chapter 4, I was surprised by what I saw. Chinna Satyam's urban and transnational style of Kuchipudi, which is open to both male and female dancers from a range of caste backgrounds, was now being touted within the village as the standard form of pedagogy for dance teachers from all over the state of Andhra Pradesh. The ostensibly traditional elements of the Kuchipudi repertoire, including *Bhāmākalāpam*, seemed immaterial to the hundreds of dancing bodies before me. Instead, Chinna Satyam's cosmopolitan style of Kuchipudi was presented as a new tradition of brahminical authority, or *sāmpradāyam*, in the village. The reverse flow from urban/transnational to village demonstrates the porousness of these boundaries in the contemporary Kuchipudi landscape. As Chinna Satyam's Kuchipudi dominated the halls of the Siddhendra Kalakshetra in the village, the brahmin male body in *strī-vēṣam* was nowhere to be seen. Yet, the brahmin male teacher still retained his seat of power as the gatekeeper of Kuchipudi dance.

More than twelve years have passed since my initial visit to Kuchipudi in 2006, when I first encountered Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma singing Satyabhama's *pravēśa daruvu* on the veranda of his house (see introduction). Over the years, it has become evident that despite its long-standing power in the Kuchipudi village, the donning of Satyabhama's *vēṣam* is not an enduring practice. Although impersonating Satyabhama remains a prescriptive mandate for all Kuchipudi brahmin men, only a select handful are successful at doing so. Changing perspectives on gender and sexuality outside the Kuchipudi village along with increased participation by women in Kuchipudi dance have altered the perception of impersonation in broader urban and transnational spaces.¹ In the current South Indian performance context, enactments of Satyabhama by brahmin male dancers often function as placeholders of "tradition" rather than displays of aesthetic and performative skill. Increasingly, such performances are displaced by the new *sāmpradāyam* of items from Chinna Satyam's repertoire. In dance classrooms in Atlanta, for example, the term "*Bhāmākalāpam*" usually only references Satyabhama's introductory item choreographed by Chinna Satyam. In fact, many of my fellow dancers, my teacher notwithstanding, have little knowledge of the full dance drama, including the lengthy spoken dialogues between Satyabhama and *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava.

The arc of this book, which moves from village to urban and transnational spaces, examines the declining value ascribed to the brahmin male body in *vēṣam* from the mid-twentieth century to the contemporary context. Today, Kuchipudi is not simply a global dance form performed in various geographic locales; it is also a form of transnational labor (Srinivasan 2012), particularly as dancers and their choreographies move back and forth across global spaces with the aid of YouTube, Skype, and other online platforms. Professional Kuchipudi dancers, both men and women, often travel to the United States and Canada over the summer months to run workshops and give performances for local organizations. These lucrative opportunities are coveted, especially for male dancers who increasingly struggle to find avenues for performance, both in India and abroad. With transnational audiences, however, come transnational expectations. For example, when I approached a Seattle-based Telugu community member to organize a performance for Venku and his troupe, it was requested that the Kuchipudi artists perform a *yakṣagāna* such as *Bhakta-Prahalāda* (featuring the devotion of the young boy Prahalada to the god Vishnu), but nothing in *strī-vēṣam*. “Our audiences don’t like to watch men dance as women,” the organizer succinctly told me. *Strī-vēṣam*, which was once a normative practice in the Kuchipudi village, is now equated with nonnormative interpretations of gender and sexuality for South Asian American audiences. The shifting perceptions of impersonation, as evinced by this Seattle-based organizer, are certainly not lost on the brahmins of the village; while brahmin men may occasionally don the *strī-vēṣam* for local performances in and around Kuchipudi, they rarely perform in *strī-vēṣam* abroad.

The transformation of Kuchipudi from a village tradition to a “classical” Indian dance form in the mid-twentieth century initially relied on the brahmin male body in *strī-vēṣam*, as evident by the enormous popularity of Satyanarayana Sarma as Satyabhama in the 1960s and 1970s. However, the urbanization of Kuchipudi through Chinna Satyam’s KAA has rendered obsolete the utility of the brahmin impersonator. Increasingly, nonbrahmin and non-male-identified bodies inhabit Kuchipudi tradition, particularly the *Bhāmākalāpam* dance drama, which was once circumscribed to hereditary brahmin men. Today, Kuchipudi dance no longer needs the brahmin male body in *strī-vēṣam*, thereby positing a challenge not only to village performance, but also hegemonic brahmin masculinity constructed in the process of that performance. The death of Satyanarayana Sarma, hailed as the greatest of all Kuchipudi impersonators and the paradigmatic example of hegemonic brahmin masculinity in the village, cements this decline. Adding to this is the growing influence of transnational discourses on gender and sexuality, which demarcate the practice of impersonation as nonnormative, or even a *kojja-vēṣam*, rather than an assertion of hegemonic masculinity. Once equivalent to white heteronormative masculinity (Connell 1995; Halberstam 1998), hegemonic brahmin masculinity is rendered remarkably fragile in the contemporary transnational landscape of Kuchipudi dance.

As an ethnography of practice, this study moves from village to urban and transnational spaces to trace the transformation of Kuchipudi impersonation with a particular attention to brahmin masculinity, both in its hegemonic and normative forms as illustrated by Satyanarayana Sarma and Venku, respectively (see chapter 2). Throughout this study, I interrogate the discursive narrative of Kuchipudi and its imagined tradition of authority (*sāmpradāyam*), particularly by questioning the dominant stories (Siddhendra's hagiography), figures (village brahmin men), and histories (classicization of Kuchipudi) that are taken for granted by many dance practitioners. In so doing, I foreground the perspectives of dancers residing in the liminal spaces of the village norms, including Pasumarti Rattayya Sarma, who could never impersonate in the manner of the famous Satyanarayana Sarma, and Chavali Balatripurasundari, who could only dance in secret without her father's consent. The invocation of constructed artifice, or *māyā* in the words of Rattayya Sarma and other village performers who enact the roles of *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava, forges a connection between the lexicon of Kuchipudi as *dance* and the critique of Kuchipudi as *construct*. As this study illustrates, even hegemonic brahmin masculinity is rendered as artifice (*māyā*) as Kuchipudi transforms from the name of a village in coastal Andhra to the nationally (and even transnationally) recognized symbol of Telugu "classical" tradition.

The book also bridges feminist theory with studies of Indian performance by exploring the ways in which gender, sexuality, and caste are contingent categories. As a hermeneutical lens for reading gender, constructed artifice (*māyā*) addresses Mrinalini Sinha's (2012, 357) challenge that a "truly global perspective on gender—rather than merely the extension of an a priori conception of gender to different parts of the globe—must give theoretical weight to the particular context in which it is articulated." So, what then does a hermeneutics of constructed artifice (*māyā*) tell us about hegemonic brahmin masculinity, in particular, and gender and caste, more broadly?

As this study demonstrates, brahmin masculinity is highly contingent and inherently mutable. While it is undoubtedly hegemonic within the village, this caste-based power is quickly displaced in urban and transnational forms of Kuchipudi dance in which donning the *strī-vēṣam* is deemed superfluous and, in some cases, queer. Gender, by extension, is both fluid and fixed in the South Asian imagination; whether it is the guising practices of Venku as Satyabhama or the verbal jest of Ravi Balakrishna as *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava, gender is portrayed as inherently mutable. And yet, gender is also incredibly rigid, as the narratives of Kuchipudi brahmin women demonstrate. Only men from village brahmin families can don *vēṣams* onstage; brahmin women, by contrast, should remain circumscribed to the domestic sphere. In urban spaces, performers are less constrained by such restrictive gender and caste norms, as women across caste lines begin to dance and even embody a range of masculinities by donning the *vēṣams* of Hindu deities such as Krishna and Shiva. Nevertheless, the ongoing influence of "Brahmin taste" (Rudisill 2007) in

cosmopolitan Kuchipudi dance still privileges upper-caste, middle-class women as aesthetically suitable for the Kuchipudi stage. Gender is deeply connected not only to place, but also to caste, which legitimizes certain gender expressions—Kuchipudi village brahmin men and upper-caste/middle-class cosmopolitan women—while proscribing others, namely the *devadāsī* and her dance (Meduri 1988; Soneji 2012). Yet, as Baliakka's story from chapter 5 demonstrates, the narratives of brahmin women can also serve as sites for resistance.

Reading Kuchipudi dance through a lens of constructed artifice (*māyā*) also reframes the ostensible linkage of gender and sexuality that often goes hand in hand in Euro-American feminist thought. Sexuality, in the contexts observed in this study, is bound by heteronormative discourse, which itself is circumscribed by caste. Brahminical ideals are also heteronormative ones, and all those actors/dancers/persons falling beyond the sphere of brahminical patriarchy are rendered queer. The invocation of the terms *kojja/hijrā* by some village brahmin men point to a rising discomfort at impersonation enacted by nonbrahmin dancers in cosmopolitan contexts and spaces. The presence of a female dancer enacting Satyabhama and a gender-variant Madhavi also highlights the disruptive power of Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* as a resistant vernacular performance (Johnson 2005). The visual aesthetics of queer diaspora, in the words of Gayatri Gopinath (2018), further threaten to expose brahmin masculinity as artifice. Drawing on the observations of Sonja Thomas (2009, 8), I would argue that it is virtually impossible to disentangle the effects of gender, caste, sexuality, and place when examining a single practice—in this case the donning of the *strī-vēṣam*—thus underscoring the dynamic flows of power and subordination across the multidimensional matrix of Kuchipudi as village *and* Kuchipudi as dance.

My vision of constructed artifice (*māyā*) is shaped by Judith Butler's ([1990] 2008, xxiv) theory that gender is a "changeable and revisable reality." It is noteworthy that the dancers of the Kuchipudi village who play the roles of *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava in *Bhāmākalāpam* did not need Butler's insights to arrive at a similar conclusion. In place of Butler's articulations, the dancers invoked *māyā*, a word that connotes illusion and artifice, to read gender role-play onstage. Drawing on both the words of these dancers and feminist insights, I read the donning of the *strī-vēṣam* as a form of constructed artifice that creates the illusion of gender identity onstage while interrogating norms of gender, sexuality, and caste in quotidian life. As a vernacular theory of gender performance and gender performativity, constructed artifice (*māyā*) extends beyond the spaces of the Kuchipudi village and Kuchipudi dance to form the shared intellectual arc (Gautam 2016, 48) of theorizing impersonation. In other words, a hermeneutics of constructed artifice (*māyā*) is a deeply localized and transnationally salient theory on the intersectionality of gender and caste in their many guises.

Finally, the declining value ascribed to the brahmin male body in *strī-vēṣam* not only undermines the authority of brahmin masculinity, but also demands a

reframing of the term “impersonation.” In this study, I have restricted my scope to the guising practices of brahmin men in the Kuchipudi village and, to a lesser degree, the practice of women guising as Hindu male deities in Chinna Satyam’s dance dramas. However, impersonation is far more extensive than simply the donning of a sartorial, gendered guise. Impersonation is ubiquitous across the South Asian landscape, with examples reappearing for millennia throughout literature, performance, and ritual. Whether it is the phenomenon of vocal impersonation within devotional writing or the interchangeability of deities and devotees within contemporary *rām-līlā* performances, impersonation is a quotidian occurrence in South Asia.² Moving away from obvious forms of guising, including the Kuchipudi brahmin male dancer in a woman’s guise, engenders the capaciousness of impersonation, a practice that both reflects and undermines dominant understandings of gender, caste, and sexuality in everyday South Asia.

POSTSCRIPT

A darkened college auditorium resounds with the slow chant of three Sanskrit words: *Om Namō Nārāyaṇāya* (lit., “Salutations to Vishnu”). As light fills the auditorium, the outlines of several dancers dressed in bright hues—vibrant orange, turmeric yellow, parrot green, and royal blue—appear onstage. The dancers’ faces are hidden as they prostrate on the ground, knees tucked under them, arms stretched out overhead, and palms joined in salutation (*namaskāram*). As the vocalist softly sings the invocatory phrase “*Om Namō Nārāyaṇāya*,” the dancers gradually rise up from the floor. By the third repetition, the dancers are sitting upright on their heels, arms stretched out overhead, with palms joined, pointing toward the sky. Slowly, the dancers rise to their feet and begin swaying their arms to represent the undulating waves of the cosmic ocean. They join their hands to form the hood of the snake, Ananta, and fashion their fingers to represent a conch (*śaṅkha*) and wheel (*cakra*). Finally, the dancers stand tall with palms facing outward in front of their chests, their ring fingers bent downward to form the *mudra tripatāka*, thus portraying the god Vishnu of the Hindu traditions. The rhythmic tapping of the double-barrel South Indian drum, *mṛdaṅgam*, provides an opening segue for the Kuchipudi dance item *Nārāyaṇīyam*.

The dancers who performed this piece were American college students enrolled in the theory-practice course “Dance and Embodied Knowledge in the Indian Context.” In this course, students are exposed to a range of readings on the history of Indian dance, aesthetic and performance theory, and Hindu religious narratives, among other topics. As an experimental theory-practice course, students read about dance in the context of a traditional classroom setting and also learn to dance themselves. One class session per week is held in a dance studio on campus where students learn the basic movements of Kuchipudi, culminating in a final performance of the piece *Nārāyaṇīyam* at the end of the semester.

“Dance and Embodied Knowledge in the Indian Context” is a course originally conceptualized by religious studies scholar Joyce Flueckiger and Atlanta-based Kuchipudi dancer Sasikala Penumarthi. Since its conceptualization, the course has been offered at a range of private and public institutions across the eastern United States for the last two decades and has been the subject of two scholarly articles co-authored by Flueckiger and me (2013, 2019). As a dancer and scholar of Kuchipudi, I have taught the course in three academic settings: Emory University (Fall 2011), Middlebury College (Fall 2013), and UNC–Chapel Hill (Fall 2017). Aside from a few dancers trained in the dance forms of Bharatanatyam and Kathak, almost all of my students had no formal training in Indian dance and many had very little familiarity with South Asia. This meant that we began the studio sessions with very basic movements, such as how to maintain the uncomfortable half-seated position while keeping the spine curved, a stance that is now ubiquitous to both Kuchipudi and Bharatanatyam. Weeks were spent learning how to synchronize feet and arms according to a three-beat time-measure, *ta-ki-ta*, and four-beat time-measure, *ta-ka-dhi-mi*. This intentionality in movement builds on what Deidre Sklar (1994, 15) refers to as *kinesthetic empathy*, or the “capacity to participate *with* another’s movement or another’s sensory experience of movement” (emphasis added). These practices were challenging, especially for students with little or no training in dance. As one student wrote in her weekly dance journal:

It was quite frustrating to tell my legs to do one thing and tell my arms to do another and try to combine the motion. Apparently I have rather poor control over my limbs . . . Despite my best efforts through the subsequent weeks, my movements still felt foreign and somewhat comical during practices. My thoughts centered around forcing the muscles in my fingers to curve into shapes, while I simultaneously struggled to think through the foot patterns . . . embodiment was a far-fetched dream.

Despite the rather slow and plodding pace, the final result was remarkable. By the end of the semester and with the help of several weekend practice sessions, the students donned brightly colored costumes purchased from India to perform the six-minute piece *Nārāyaṇīyam* before an audience of their friends and family. While the performance itself was short and the execution of movements often uncoordinated, these American college students experienced their own form of the Arangetram (lit., “ascent of the stage”) that is now ubiquitous to many “classical” Indian dance forms (Schwartz 2004).

I mention the course “Dance and Embodied Knowledge in the Indian Context” because it is likely that the readers of this book are situated within a university setting, perhaps in the United States, Canada, or India. Having taught the course three times in three entirely different American university contexts, ranging from a small private liberal arts college to a large public state institution, I have become increasingly aware of the disruptive possibilities that a course such as this can

offer. While most Kuchipudi dance classes begin by invoking the hagiography of Siddhendra and the legacy of the brahmins of the Kuchipudi village, my version of this course centered on foundational essays by Avanthi Meduri (1988) and Matthew Harp Allen (1997) that interrogate the classicization of Bharatanatyam in twentieth-century South India. Students also read the works of Anuradha Jonnalagadda (1996b), Daves Soneji (2012), and Rumya Putcha (2015) to consider the historical development of Kuchipudi dance, particularly in relation to court-san communities. Studio classes were framed with these critical historiographies, prompting students to be mindful of the complicated pasts their bodies inhabited through dancing a piece like *Nārāyaṇīyam*. As students prepared for their final performance, they read scholarly works on the Arangetram, inviting them to examine the symbolic capital and bodily labor undergirding their brightly colored costumes and bells imported from India (Devarajan 2011; Srinivasan 2012).

The bodies in my classroom were overwhelmingly nonbrahmin and non-male-identified. The composition of the class has included a variety of students from a range of national, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, ranging from a white male student from Maine who spent his summers working on a farm to a South Asian female student with extensive training in Rukmini Arundale's style of Bharatanatyam. The absence of the brahmin male body was, at least to me, particularly striking, especially as I continued to work on this book while teaching the class. In the dance studios of Atlanta, Middlebury, and Chapel Hill, brahmin men were entirely peripheral to the embodiment of Kuchipudi.

The ability to dance while teaching and researching the history of dance reshaped my own pedagogical practices, as well as my theoretical commitments for this book. In her work on Indian dance as transnational labor, Priya Srinivasan (2012, 16–17) outlines her own methodological motivations after doing ethnographic work in dance classrooms in California:

I increasingly questioned the social, political, and often ahistorical framework that encircles Indian dance in the United States. My love of and frustration with Indian dance drove me to find a way to write about it that made sense to me. So, the unruly spectator, a viewer who offers a nonpassive feminist perspective, was born My frustration with the current practice of Indian dance led me to study its past, which then allowed me to return to contemporary and familiar spaces with a greater understanding of their politico-historical contexts.

Prompted by Srinivasan's method of the "unruly spectator," I began to conceive of the college classroom and dance studio as the space to rewrite the script for Kuchipudi dance, bridging its contentious past and transnational present. Rather than offering a traditional guru-student model of dance learning, I invited my students to interrogate the very practice they were learning to embody. Together, we thought carefully about themes of embodiment, appropriation, and authority,

all while learning to fashion our fingers in the shape of the peacock feathers adorning Krishna's crown. Beyond Sklar's (1994) conception of kinesthetic empathy, the students participated in a form of *kinesthetic interrogation* that questioned the long-standing legacy of hegemonic brahmin masculinity and the inheritance of a particular historical narrative as the foundation for Kuchipudi dance. The arc of this book, which examines both the hegemony and artifice of brahmin masculinity, reflects these feminist commitments. As a transnational form of embodiment, Kuchipudi, at least the version I teach my students, simultaneously enables the construction of hegemony and offers the site for its resistance. The convergence of embodied aesthetic practice and feminist critical insights thus enables us to rewrite the script for *Kuchipudi*, a term laden with lingering questions and performative possibilities (Arudra 1994; Allen 1997).

