

## Article

# Rupture and Disruption: Reflections on “Making” and “Knowing” Dance

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**Abstract:** This essay follows a somewhat unconventional approach to writing about Indian dance in the diaspora. I say “unconventional” because it unfolds as a kind of self-reflexive narration of my own journey as a “doubly diasporic” Indian dancer, born in Singapore but having made my career in North America. In essence, I map my own unconventional paths to understanding Indian dance in the diaspora, outside the tired and troublesome idea of “dance as heritage”. The aim of this critical meditation on my own work is to offer up new possibilities for moving Indian dance into progressive conceptual spaces that direct it out of the discursive field of cultural nationalism that frames the idea of “heritage”.

**Keywords:** critical; caste; queer; hereditary; Bharatanatyam; contemporary; sexuality; pedagogy; political

This essay is based on a recent paper I presented in Kyoto, Japan, on 18 March 2023 as part of an international symposium entitled “Indian Diaspora and Indian Performing Arts around the Globe” organized by Professor Yoshiaki Takemura, the National Museum of Ethnology, and Kyoto University. The symposium featured both local Japanese and non-Japanese scholars who specialize in critical studies of the circulation of Indian dance and music in the global Indian diaspora. Given the overlapping themes between the symposium and the current volume, I have modified my presentation for the essay that follows. My essay follows a somewhat unconventional approach to writing about themes that have emerged from this symposium. I say “unconventional” because it unfolds as a kind of self-reflexive narration of my own journey as a “doubly diasporic” Indian dancer, born in Singapore but having made my career in North America. In essence, I critically unpack and map my own unconventional paths to understanding Indian dance in the diaspora. Using a biographical method, I illustrate the ways in which my own dance-making locates Indian dance outside the tired and troublesome idea of “dance as heritage”. The aim of this critical meditation on my own work is to offer up new possibilities for moving Indian dance into progressive conceptual spaces that direct it out of the discursive field of Indian cultural nationalism that frames the idea of “Indian heritage”. Following Performance Studies scholar Diana Taylor, I envisage “knowledge as inseparable from struggle”, and advocate an “embodied way of engaging with others that takes us beyond the disciplined and restrictive ways of knowing and acting” that, in my context, are the legacies not only of colonialism and nationalism, but also of Brahminism and heteronormativity (Taylor 2020, pp. 23–28). Thus, the new epistemologies I bring to bear on the aspects of Indian dance through analyzing my own work sit at the intersections of my intellectual and personal struggles with caste, class, sexuality, religion, and race. In thinking about some of my own challenges and inventions, I hope to share and create alliances with others in the field who may be working through similar issues, particularly among economically underprivileged or caste- or gender-oppressed dancers and dance-makers in the global South Asian diaspora. This piece is essentially a way of sharing, critically reflecting, creating space, and moving forward into distinctly progressive futures for South Asian dance, particularly in the diaspora.



**Citation:** Krishnan, Hari. 2023. Rupture and Disruption: Reflections on “Making” and “Knowing” Dance. *Arts* 12: 122. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts12030122>

Academic Editor: Lionel Popkin

Received: 31 March 2023

Revised: 5 June 2023

Accepted: 7 June 2023

Published: 12 June 2023



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## 1. Locations and Dislocations

I would like to begin with some thoughts on some of the forces that drive my creative work as a diasporic Indian dancer twice removed from India. I begin by unequivocally acknowledging my privilege as a dominant-caste individual of Brahmin origin and all the complex forms of hierarchy this location engenders, especially in the context of the history of Bharatanatyam dance. Over the past century, Bharatanatyam was undeniably appropriated from its hereditary community of performers, who today are known as “isai velalar”, and reinvented for nationalist ends by Brahmin elites.<sup>1</sup> I came to this realization in my own practice quite early, and hence my process of “coming to terms” with the social and aesthetic hierarchies inherent in the practice of modern Bharatanatyam stretches back over almost three decades. As a youth living in Singapore, I was trained in the Kalakshetra style of Bharatanatyam dance in the 1980s. But in the very early 1990s, the caste, class, and gender issues and growing religious fundamentalism around this kind of Bharatanatyam were becoming increasingly obvious to me.<sup>2</sup> I left performing the Kalakshetra style, and stopped dancing for a couple years, until I met K.P. Kittappa Pillai of Thanjavur (1913–1999, Figure 1), who very generously accepted me to study with him, and thus, in my early twenties, my training began once again from scratch, but this time under the watchful gaze of both male and female teachers from the former courtesan community.



**Figure 1.** Hari Krishnan with Thanjavur K.P. Kittappa Pillai in 1995. Collection of Hari Krishnan.

Over the next two decades, I learnt Bharatanatyam exclusively with teachers from the hereditary community (Figure 2), and I am proud to say that my dance showed it. Unlike the more conventional Bharatanatyam dancers, in these relationships of discipline and pedagogy, I was not understood as a “patron” of these artists, for hereditary artists understood that I was a working-class university student, albeit a Brahmin, and not a wealthy patron from an elite family in India. But these relationships nevertheless taught me a lot about my own caste location as it was juxtaposed so vividly against the Bahujan aesthetics of former courtesan practice. Indeed, my teachers were also conscious of the caste issue and talked to me about it in private, while at the very same time they remained “vestiges of the past” who existed on the extreme margins of mainstream Bharatanatyam.



**Figure 2.** Hari Krishnan with Viralimalai R. Muttukannammal in 2005. Photo: Cylla Von Tiedemann.

While it is eminently important to keep the question of my caste location front-and-center, I would also like to point out other forms of social hierarchy and exclusion that come to bear on who I am as a performer and as an individual. Unlike most diasporic performers of Bharatanatyam, I come from Singapore and *not India*, as I mentioned earlier, and thus the question of my “authenticity” and legitimacy as a performer and scholar of “Indian dance” has loomed over me for my entire career. In addition, unlike many Bharatanatyam artists in the North American diaspora—who are the products of upper-caste privilege in terms of education and employment that has a long history in colonial Madras—I come from a working-class family background. Neither of my parents were college educated, and I would certainly characterize my own upbringing as lower middle class, if that. Finally, as a student of *isai velalar* teachers, my dance has not had the kind of currency and capital that comes with the spectacle of the reinvented Bharatanatyam. Until recently—when there has been a trend to create a new fetishized commodity out of the dance traditions that were preserved by former courtesans and hereditary male dance masters—the “older” form of Bharatanatyam was considered “archaic” and “outdated” by the artistic mainstream in India.<sup>3</sup> For dominant-caste performers, it was a kind of vestige of a feudal, “old world” that was at odds with the “new” Bharatanatyam that had morphed into a highly melodramatic, hyperathletic storytelling form about Hindu gods and goddesses. The lyrical and poetic dimensions of hereditary performance practices had little currency in this new world, and until recently, there was no audience for the kind of Bharatanatyam that I had spent a very long time attempting to understand. Over the past few years, there have been some unique dancer-activists such as Nrithya Pillai whose positionality has altered some of these politics, for her embodiment of an older aesthetic paired with her hereditary identity and radically anti-caste stance challenges the implicit forms of social and aesthetic discrimination that until recently were at the center of the practice of Bharatanatyam.

## 2. On Hyphenated Identities and Other Binary Representations of Self

As a diasporic artist/scholar, I confront and rupture dualistic “East/West” binaries by creating socially conscious choreographies charged with formal and political meanings. My work inevitably represents my artistic response to conservative anxieties around art, race and sexuality, sexual orientation, nationalism, post-colonialism, immigrant experiences,

and diasporic cultural identities. All my works resonate with and, in one way or another, reflect this cluster of ideas. Works such as *Mea Culpa* (2007; [Krishnan 2019c](#)) and *Holy Cow(s)!* ([Krishnan 2019b](#)) oscillate between past, present and future, and integrate aspects of Bharatanatyam, American pop art/culture, dance history, club dancing from Germany, and Euro-American contemporary dance. In these pieces, the textured dimensions of cultural globalization can be seen in which medial boundaries between “high” and “popular” art break down, and hyphenated identities come into sharp relief.

Inspired by a vintage photograph of the 1926 work of American dancer Ted Shawn, “The Cosmic Dance of Shiva”, *Mea Culpa* (Figure 3) is a solo work I created based on ideas of re-appropriating the misappropriated. Ted Shawn’s fascination with India and its dance traditions is clearly seen in the elaborate, painstaking way he has imagined and staged “The Cosmic Dance of Shiva”. I draw from the recent book *Ted Shawn: His Life, Writings and Dances* ([Scolieri 2019](#)) by dance historian Paul Scolieri to unravel the interactions between American Orientalism and American queerness through the body and work of Ted Shawn.<sup>4</sup> I first created *Mea Culpa* in 2007. In 2019, *Mea Culpa* ([Krishnan 2019c](#)) was presented in New York City at La MaMa Moves Dance Festival as part of my company’s mixed bill. I reimagined the work in the context of a South Asian American wedding, in which a nervous (closeted) groom at his heteronormative wedding is unsure about going ahead with the ceremony. He passes through a surreal journey during the course of the dance, discovering who he really is thanks to the ghosts of queer American dancer Ted Shawn and the authority represented by the “dancing god” Shiva. The choreographic vocabulary is an intentional cacophony of balletic movement and Indian dance gestures, colliding the clichéd “East/West” binaries and aesthetics, set against an equally cacophonous score of Rossini’s *William Tell Overture* and South Indian *mridangam* percussion. A consistently flamboyant, queer, and relentless, almost breathless movement aesthetic in the piece function as an allegory for both the anxieties and masculinist power represented by the modern white American “gay” man. The piece worked through questions of racialized fetishism, sexuality, and homoeroticism, drawing in part from a large body of anti-Orientalist work on representations of queer sexualities, including that of scholars such as [Massad \(2007\)](#).



**Figure 3.** Hari [Krishnan](#)’s (2019c) choreography of *Mea Culpa* featuring Spenser Stroud. Photo: John Carr.

Similarly, *Holy Cow(s)!* ([Krishnan 2019b](#), Figure 4) is an ensemble work addressing my personal politics with regard to the pervasiveness of racialized cultural appropriation,

specifically my response to an offensive comment made by choreographer Mark Morris in 2015 at the Lincoln Center, when he said, “cultural appropriation is just culture . . . airport gift shopping, as I like to call it”. *Holy Cow(s)!* (Krishnan 2019b) is an attempt to break free from my “stereotype straight-jacketed”, namely the expectation that a South Asian choreographer must invoke and reproduce certain images and textures of “Indian dance” (gestural vocabulary, references to religion and “the spiritual”, and a host of others) and, by extension, of what it means to occupy a South Asian “cultural space”. Such expectations are reified by the global dance community and are often wholeheartedly embraced by choreographers of South Asian descent. I subvert these expectations throughout the choreography. For example, in the opening section of *Holy Cow(s)!* (Krishnan 2019b), a Bharatanatyam dancer dressed in black enters the stage wearing sneakers and ankle bells, performing complex footwork while eating a McDonald’s hamburger over a soundscape of racist remarks from the mainstream dance community I have experienced while performing in the west (“I love the title *Holy Cows*, you guys pray to cows, right?”; “Your dancing is so Bollywood!”; “I love the slow section, is that from Yoga?”). This choreography embodies the layers of social and somatic subversions. It carefully unpacks the typical semiotics one associates with Indian “classical” dance—the bells, the “sacrality” of dance, and the laws of purity and impurity that supposedly govern dance as a “Hindu ritual”. These layers of subversion are actualized as the dancer performs Bharatanatyam footwork with intense rigor and relentless zeal. With a combination of irreverent humor and exuberant queerness, *Holy Cow(s)!* (Krishnan 2019b) picks apart the stereotypes I continually experience as a queer, Indian-origin immigrant dancer working in North America, even after a professional dancing career that spans more than three decades.



**Figure 4.** *Holy Cow(s)!* (Krishnan 2019b) by Hari Krishnan, featuring dancers Paul Charbonneau, Xi Yi. Eury German and Roney Lewis. Photo: John Carr.

While both *Mea Culpa* (Krishnan 2019b) and *Holy Cow(s)!* (Krishnan 2019b) are deeply personal works based on my lived experience as a queer artist practicing Indian dance in the West, they also subvert the sanctity of the Brahmanical gaze. In both pieces, the rambunctious queer dancing body disrupts the structured ideology of Brahminic heteronormativity (Krishnan 2008). The dancing in both pieces is marked by a messiness that moves us away from the “neatness” and caste- and class-inflected aesthetic regimes of the Brah-

minic, “classical” Indian dance. Unruly bodies collide with the visuals of Hindu nationalist power to produce irreverent movements that aim to disrupt and dislodge power through a queer and playful aesthetic. The question of who occupies centers and margins in the world of South Asian dance takes me to the issue of my sexuality in the Indian dance milieu. As I increasingly became aware of my sexuality, in the early 1990s, it was not uncommon to be mocked as somehow a “less legitimate” dancer for being queer-identified; this was particularly true among the upper-caste cis-gender women performers.<sup>5</sup> These politics also permeated the diaspora, where some teachers who came to North America as the wives of successful upper-caste professionals were (and continue to be) valorized as “respectable” purveyors of “Hindu heteronormative heritage”. Queer individuals in this context felt othered and outright marginalized. While now the situation is quite different, since queer sexuality has even been embraced by the Hindu Right,<sup>6</sup> in the early 1990s, the question of my sexuality as an exclusionary phenomenon in the North American Indian diaspora was surely present: I could not occupy the same spaces of “respect” in the mainstream Indian community as the cis-gender, married, family women who kept the boat of “Bharatanatyam as Hindu heritage” afloat in the North American diaspora. Indeed, much of my creative work emerges out of the uneasiness of this period in my life that lasted for close to a decade. Today, the appropriation of queer identities and politics by cis-gender performers and even by the majoritarian state in India presents its own set of problems that have spurred me to create works such as *Holy Cow(s)!* (Krishnan 2019b) and my upcoming *Rowdies in Love* (2024, Figure 5) that directly confront these new developments. I think this aspect of my work also speaks to the precarious position of those of us in the diaspora who do not want to perpetuate Indian dance as “Hindu heritage” or “national heritage”. I do not run dance schools where I script nationalist or neo-traditional culture onto the bodies of young people, but instead produce works that challenge the very logic and relevance of such projects.



**Figure 5.** Hari Krishnan et al.’s, forthcoming work *Rowdies in Love* (2024) featuring dancers Arun Mathai and Sujit Vaidya. Photo: Miles Brokenshire.

### 3. Intermedial Pathways

My doctoral research and subsequent monograph entitled *Celluloid Classicism* (Krishnan 2019a) focused on the braided histories of Bharatanatyam dance and the early Tamil cinema. In the book, I contend that the aesthetics of Bharatanatyam that many now

think of as “classical” and stemming from an “unbroken millennia old tradition” were actually crafted in dialogue with the emergence of dance as spectacle in the early South Indian cinema beginning in the late 1930s. In other words, the reinvention of Bharatanatyam at the hands of elites in Madras cannot be understood apart from the emergence of a visual, aural, and somatic aesthetic for the cinema. The book traces the social and aesthetic histories of both the reinvented Bharatanatyam and the cinema to illustrate these deep and impactful connections. This research in part stemmed from my own understanding of the constructed idea of “the classical” in modern India, a notion that harks back to both the cultural nationalism of the early twentieth century and the repopulation of Bharatanatyam, India’s paradigmatic “classical dance”, by dominant-caste bodies. For me, the label of “the classical” signaled two things. First, it was a way to project Bharatanatyam back into an ancient civilizational glory on the part of nationalists who wanted to remove it from its highly localized courtesan roots. Second, the pitting of “the classical” against “the folk” was more of a sociological distinction than an aesthetic one. So artforms that were re-populated in the twentieth century by the dominant castes and upper-classes were stamped “classical” by the State, whereas other non-Brahmin forms that were not reinvented or re-populated were classified as “folk” by the Indian State. In Tamil Nadu, for example, the popular theatre of northern Tamil Nadu, known as *kuttu*, *kattaikkuttu*, or *terukuttu*, existed alongside courtesan dance in the late nineteenth century. By the middle of the twentieth century, however, it came to be known as “folk”, while courtesan dance, its aesthetic “cousin”, on account of being appropriated and reinterpreted by dominant castes, was suddenly termed “classical”.

This kind of critical thinking around the category of “the classical” and the aesthetic, social, and political baggage it carries was the inspiration for two important interventions. On the one hand, I realized that it was important to continue, in the practice of Bharatanatyam, the early aesthetic dialogue between Bharatanatyam on stage and Bharatanatyam in the early Tamil cinema—for these two forms were created in absolute conversation with one another. To this end, in my own performances of Bharatanatyam I began to perform songs from within the courtesan community that were used in the Tamil cinema but had been lost in the modern so-called “classical” repertoire of Bharatanatyam.

In another choreography entitled *Bollywood Hopscotch* (Krishnan 2010) (Figure 6), a piece I created in 2004, I juxtaposed popular, old Hindi film music with the *jatis* or rhythmic clusters of abstract dance in Bharatanatyam. In bringing these two aesthetic forms together in what could be perceived as a “jarring” manner, I wanted to foreground the idea of spectacle that undergirds both forms. Moreover, as with most of my work, I wanted to point out the absence of the erotic in the staged versions of Bharatanatyam that have become more about virtuosic, hyper-athletic movement, and the over-the-top threads of desire that run through the popular Indian cinema. Again, the point here was to show how the “classical” and the “popular” seem to have been neatly compartmentalized by the State and by elite performers, but how in reality these lines have always been (and will always continue to be) blurred.

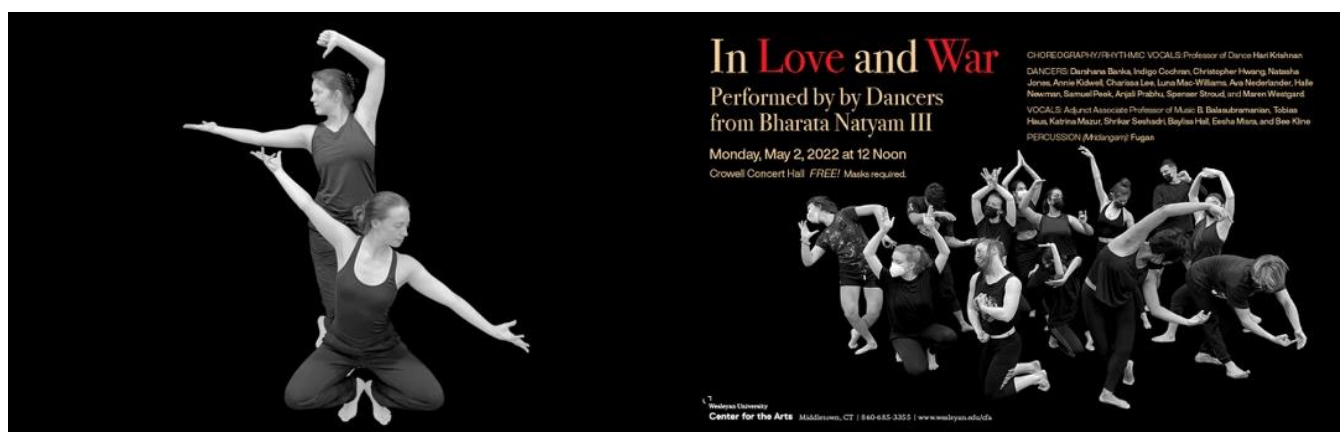


**Figure 6.** Hari Krishnan's (2010) *Bollywood Hopscotch* featuring dancers Nalin Bisnath, Shobana Raveendran, Masumi Sato, Emily Watts and Vinod Para. Photo: Miles Brokenshire.

#### 4. A Pedagogy beyond Heritage Politics

I would like to end with this final section, a reflection on the futures of the study of Indian dance in North American Academic contexts. I have had the very good fortune of being able to actualize my thoughts on dance at Wesleyan University, where I have been teaching for close to twenty-five years. The unique position that Bharatanatyam holds in Wesleyan's history takes us back to critical questions around non-Brahmin and courtesan pasts of the form on the one hand.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, it also raises questions of what students are to gain from learning this form as undergraduates in a liberal arts setting. What are the priorities in terms of history, technique, and context? What is at stake in the pedagogical representation of Indian dance? For me, "dance as heritage" raises its problematic hood here—whose heritage are we talking about? When American students from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds come to learn about Bharatanatyam, whose heritage is being staged, and upon whose bodies, and for whose benefit? In trying to confront and address some of these issues, I offer a critical pedagogy of Bharatanatyam that is transparent about the history of appropriation, caste and gender politics, and deep forms of somatic nationalism that undergird the form. Moreover, I discard things such as "costumes", making students aware of the "invention" of such artefacts at the time of the reinvention in the 1930s, and essentially think of Bharatanatyam as a kind of somatic meditation on society and aesthetics. At Wesleyan, the mandate of the Dance Department is "Everyone Can Dance". In other words, all students are welcome into the class, in a move that confirms that diversity, equity and inclusivity are embraced at every stage. Dance at Wesleyan is taught in the context of a liberal arts college education and not in the context of a dance conservatoire. We are not interested in what it means to produce "good" or "bad" dancing in the manner of a conservatoire or a South Asian dance academy. Instead, we are interested in *engaged* dancing, where students are wholly curious and invested in multiple aspects of the forms they study. At the very onset of my Bharatanatyam classes, students are informed that the course will not be taught as "cultural heritage" and that the uniqueness of learning Bharatanatyam at a liberal arts college is about critically unpacking its histories and aesthetics. South Asian students, especially those who have previous Indian dance training, almost immediately recognize the unique experience of learning

Bharatanatyam at Wesleyan. They not only interface with alternative histories and aesthetics of the form, but also learn to situate Bharatanatyam as a contemporary practice. They learn to be critical of the cultural politics that undergird some of their previous training or understandings of the form's history. The choreography that is produced over the course of the semester is carefully crafted to incorporate a variety of aesthetic perspectives and abilities that explicitly reconfigures Bharatanatyam as a contemporary, queer and inclusive dance practice. In a performance entitled *In Love and War* (Krishnan 2022, Figure 7), for example, student performers deploy all these modalities to stage, displaying what they have learnt in my advanced Bharatanatyam course, shifting the focus of Indian dance pedagogy beyond the realm of "straightforward" heritage politics. Students learn to think critically about each gesture and each step, and they are also able to contextualize movement and aesthetic choices from a critical socio-political standpoint. For me, this is the future for Bharatanatyam that I would like to see; one where the form is certainly engaged with, but critically; where every step becomes a question; and where there is still joy and an exploration of selfhood in movement.



**Figure 7.** Hari Krishnan's (2022) *In Love and War* featuring Wesleyan dancers Darshana Banka, Indigo Cochran, Christopher Hwang, Natasha Jones, Annie Kidwell, Charissa Lee, Luna Mac-Williams, Ava Nederlander, Halle Newman, Samuel Peek, Anjali Prabhu, Spencer Stroud and Maren Westgard. Photo Design: John Elmore.

I would like to conclude this piece by looping back around to Diana Taylor. In her new work *!Presente!: The Politics of Presence* (Taylor 2020), she speaks at length of what she calls "co-presence", of "subjectivity as participatory and relational, founded on mutual recognition and responsibility" (248). In thinking about my own work and the visions that it has actualized for me and my collaborators, I would like to think that it offers a new paradigm with which to replace the old regimes of hierarchy and inequity that seem to be at the very heart of Indian dance, both in India and its vast diaspora. Through the lifelong practice of dance and dance-making, I hope to have created new types of agency, gestures of empathy and sharing, and, perhaps most importantly, a way of looking beyond the nationalist and religious frames that have come to dominate the substance of what is globally thought of as "Indian dance". I hope that some of the work I have presented here moves us in the direction of rupturing and disrupting these frames of interpretation and embodiment.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not available.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For more on the history of courtesans and process of caste reinvention in modern South India, see (Soneji 2012), and for an overview of some of the key issues in the modern history of Bharatanatyam, see the essays in *Bharatanatyam: A Reader* (Soneji 2010).
- <sup>2</sup> While an earlier generation of scholars such as Srinivasan (1984) were already grappling with the caste and class dimensions of Bharatanatyam by the late 1980s, my perspectives were also informed by the emerging body of scholarship that connected Brahminic stewardship of “culture” to larger political issues, especially the growing public presence of the RSS in Madras through *smarta* Brahmin leadership in religious centers such as Kanchipuram, and the early work of anthropologist Mary Hancock (1995) was instructive in this period.
- <sup>3</sup> The Brahminic manipulation of the aesthetic and moral valences of courtesan performance and its history is complex in modern South India. At the time of the reinvention, nationalist elites went to great lengths to distance themselves from the courtesan past. The middle-class, dominant-caste women who inhabited the spaces of the newly invented “classical” dances did not want themselves to be confused with courtesans, nor did they want to embody traces of this past that might have lingered in their performance practices. However, as a growing academic discourse around courtesans began to emerge in the 1980s, the tide slowly began to change. A number of elite Brahmin women performers began the search for the “lost repertoire” in hereditary communities, and engaged in relationships of fiscal patronage with old former courtesans in villages and small towns, mining them for “rare” pieces that these women could then “re-package” for modern urban audiences, essentially extending the appropriative agenda of the reinvention into the late twentieth century. Over the last decade or so, another generation of Brahmin performers have continued this trajectory but by claiming a totalizing appropriation. They claim to perform not Bharatanatyam, but “Sadir,” one of the many names by which the dance was known in the pre-reinvention period (Pillai 2022). For me, any such claims to the past are epistemologically and ontologically impossible, given the extreme rupture that the caste-driven re-population and discursive and corporeal reinvention of Bharatanatyam represents in the modern world. The particularities of the caste dimensions of the reinvention of Bharatanatyam are explored in an essay I have recently co-written with (Krishnan et al., forthcoming).
- <sup>4</sup> Choreographer/Scholar Lionel Popkin explored similar themes in a piece he created about Ruth St. Denis entitled *Ruth Doesn't Live Here Anymore* in 2013 (Popkin 2015).
- <sup>5</sup> The deep feelings of isolation and anxiety that I felt in this period led to some of my scholarly work on representations of gender, and masculinity in particular, in modern Bharatanatyam. I published some of this work in an essay in which I historicize men's mimesis of courtesan dance in South India, going as far back as the late eighteenth century, and juxtapose this with the emergence of the nationalist, hypermasculine performer of post-reinvention Bharatanatyam (Krishnan 2009).
- <sup>6</sup> For more on the ways in which Hindutva and the expansive project of Hindu nationalism has embraced queer identities, see two recent essays on the figure of the “kinnar” (*hijra*) transwoman Laxminarayan Tripathi who has become a voice for radical forms of Hindutva in northern India (Goel 2020; Bevilacqua 2022).
- <sup>7</sup> This is a reference to the fact that dancer T. Balasaraswati (1918–1984), who came from a former courtesan family, taught music and dance at Wesleyan through the late 1960s, 1970s and even early 1980s. This represents some of the university's earliest systemic engagements with South Asia.

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