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Reassembling Traditional Dance:
Choreographic Reassembly and Cultural Mutation in a Multicultural Diaspora

by

Aparna R Nambiar

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Performance Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:

Associate Prof. Shannon Steen, Chair

Associate Prof. SanSan Kwan

Prof. Aihwa Ong.

Summer 2022

Abstract

Reassembling Traditional Dance: Choreographic Reassembly and Cultural Mutation in a Multicultural Diaspora

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Aparna Ramachandran Nambiar

Doctor of Philosophy in Performance Studies

University of California, Berkeley

Associate Prof. Shannon Steen, Chair

Reassembling Traditional Dance reveals traditional dance choreography in contemporary Singapore and Southeast Asia to be a zone of intense interaction between two interwoven but distinct sets of postcolonial and globalized elements. The first is the *colonial assemblage* of governance practices formed in the era of British colonialism in Malaya, which continues to define the discourse of tradition in Singapore. I identify how racial and temporal logic rooted in colonial epistemologies replicates itself as grant frameworks, self-Orientalizing marketing strategies and festival themes, rendering non-western dance within the familiar frame of the “traditional”. The *entrepreneurial assemblage* of contemporary, neoliberal Singapore on the other hand is constituted by neoliberal policy instruments that now transform community-based performance cultures like Indian, Malay and other “traditional” dance, into sites of creative economic regulation, adding market values to the mix of factors that shape urban Indian identity performance in Singapore today.

I offer *choreographic reassembly* as an organizing conceptual framework to analyze choreographers emerging in relation to both the colonial and entrepreneurial assemblages. Choreographic reassembly entails deliberate and conscious experimentation with dance forms and aesthetics to meet immediate concerns of contemporary professional life as an artist in a complex, postcolonial, globalized, multiracial and multicultural art ecology. Choreographic reassembly is therefore the deliberate reshuffling and play with conventional and unconventional elements in a given traditional dance form, as a response to transformations in the context of cultural production in different sites. A range of examples ranging from early experiments by Singaporean choreographers K.P. and Santha Bhaskar in the 1950s, to more recent works by Singaporean, Indian, Malaysian, Thai and Indonesian choreographers are explored as cases of choreographic reassembly. Methodologically, this dissertation employs performance and dance analysis, historiography and ethnography. The concept of *choreographic reassembly* is indebted to Collier and Ong’s conceptual model of “global assemblages” drawn from contemporary, urban anthropological studies of globalization. Notions of cultural mutation and cross-generic experimentation draw from Donna Haraway’s philosophical interventions into anthropocentric epistemologies by “staying with the trouble” of colonial and capitalist inheritances.

Dedicated to my parents, Jayashree and Ramachandran, my brother Abhilash and my generous teachers Santha Bhaskar and Raka Maitra.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	1
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	III
LIST OF FIGURES	V
INTRODUCTION	1
REASSEMBLING SINGAPOREAN MULTIRACIALISM	4
METHOD	7
STAKES	8
THE QUESTION OF TRADITIONAL DANCE IN CONTEMPORARY ASIA	10
GLOBAL VERSUS TRANSNATIONAL	13
DEMANDS, DESIRES AND DECISIONS: INDIAN DANCERS AND FLEXIBLE CITIZENSHIP	15
CHAPTER BREAKDOWN	18
CHAPTER 1: SURROGATING SINGAPOREAN MULTIRACIALISM	22
MODERN HISTORIES OF TRADITIONAL INDIAN DANCE IN SINGAPORE	25
PERFORMING MULTI-RACIALISM: A DOOMED ROMANCE?	31
THE <i>NARTAKI</i> AS A SACRIFICIAL DOUBLE	33
THE LABOR OF SURROGATION	37
EMBODYING INDIAN FEMININITY	39
SURROGATING SINGAPOREAN MULTIRACIALISM	41
CHAPTER 2: BHARATANATYAM AND BUDDHIST DIPLOMACY	43
BUDDHIST DIPLOMACY – INDIC VS INTER-ASIA PERSPECTIVES	45
NESTED PERSPECTIVES	47
BHARATANATYAM AND BUDDHIST DIPLOMACY	49
TRANSNATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF CHOREOGRAPHIC REASSEMBLY	53
SOUTHEAST ASIAN INFLECTIONS IN SINGAPORE-MADE BHARATANATYAM	56
CREATIVITY IN NEOLIBERAL TIME: ARTISTIC INTUITION MEETS THE PROBLEM-SOLVING MINDSET	58
DANCING IN EMPTINESS	59
CHAPTER 3: ANTICIPATORY TRADITIONALISM	63
ENLIGHTENMENT AS CULTURAL POLICY	66
CHOREOGRAPHING ANTICIPATION	69
JOGET’S DIRTY SECRET	73
CONCLUSION	78
CHAPTER 4: GENERIC ENGINEERING	80
THE <i>SOFT MACHINE</i> OF ASIAN CONTEMPORARY DANCE	81
COMPOSTING CONTEMPORARY ASIAN PERFORMANCE	83
GODS, SPIRITS AND GORGONS: IN SEARCH OF EPOCHAL FIGURES	84
<i>BEHALF</i> : THE RIDDLE OF THE SPHINX	86
<i>MEDIUM</i> : RECOVERING JAVANESE SPIRITS ON THE GLOBAL STAGE	89
“GENERIC ENGINEERING” SOUTHEAST ASIAN PERFORMANCE	93
COMPOSTING TRADITION IN CONTEMPORARY SINGAPORE	95
RECLAIM AND REFUSAL	96
MAKING THE ASIAN, CONTEMPORARY IN SINGAPORE	98
PALLAVI AND SLOW DEATH	100
INTERCULTURAL MUTATIONS OF THE TRADITIONAL	103
CONCLUSION	104
WORKS CITED	106

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List of Figures

- Fig. 1. Dancer Gabriel Palai Anbu in "Anweshana: The Search for Nalanda". University Cultural Center, Singapore March 2011. Source: NUS Centre For the Arts.
- Fig. 2. Dancers Sandhya Suresh (above) and Carline Chin (below) for "Yahi Madhava". The Pond Studios Singapore, 2022. Photograph by Tan Ngiap Heng. Source: Chowk Productions Singapore
- Fig. 3. NUS Indian dancers stage the Nalanda Project at the University Culture Center Dance Studio Singapore in March 2010. Source: NUS Centre For the Arts.
- Fig. 4. A still featuring dancer Khok Kee captured from the video montage played at the outset of *Anweshana: The Search for Nalanda* at the University Culture Center in March 2011. Source: Ramchander Krishna.
- Fig. 5. Panel depicting Shweta Padmanabhan demonstrating transposal of Bharatanatyam pose typically used to portray Hindu goddesses to instead depict the *bodhisattva*, Tara. Photograph by Abhishek Balasubramaniam Source: NUS Centre For
- Fig 6. "Adi Buddha Varnam" staged for *Anweshana: The Search for Nalanda* at the University Culture Center in March 2011. Source: NUS Centre For the Arts. Source: NUS Centre For the Arts.
- Fig. 7. "Tara" staged for *Anweshana: The Search for Nalanda* at the University Culture Center in March 2011. Source: NUS Centre For the Arts
- Fig 8. Dancer Shivashini Kummar as Nairatmya in *Anweshana: The Search for Nalanda* at the University Culture Center in March 2011. Source: NUS Centre For the Arts
- Fig 9. Rianto in *Medium*. Source: Rianto
- Fig. 10. *Behalf* featuring Pichet Klunchun (right). Photo, Etang Chen. Source: Horse Dance Theatre.
- Fig 11. *Medium* featuring Rianto. Source: Rianto
- Fig. 12. *Medium* featuring Rianto (L) and Cahwati (R). Photo: Vojtěch Brtnický. Source: Rianto
- Fig 13. January Low in *Reclaim*, 2019. Source: January Low.
- Fig 14. *Pallavi with Stillness* (2018). Dancers (L-R) Chloe Chotrani, Sandhya Suresh, Raka Maitra, Karishma Nair and Meera Gurumurthy. Source: Chowk Productions.
- Fig 15. *Pallavi through Abstractions* (2020). Dancers (L-R) Caroline Chin, Raka Maitra and Sandhya Suresh. Source: Chowk Productions.

Introduction

When is traditional dance? In her 2017 paper, dance scholar SanSan Kwan provocatively questions the temporality of contemporary dance with the title “When is contemporary dance?” In this dissertation I draw from Kwan’s question to suggest that from the practitioner’s point of view, traditional dance is less squarely located in the past but more oriented toward the future. This dissertation offers *choreographic reassembly* as a conceptual term to articulate how choreographers co-produce, intervene and therefore anticipate the future of ‘tradition’ in the urban, Asian cosmopolitan milieu of Singapore and Southeast Asia. Choreographic reassembly entails deliberate and conscious experimentation with dance forms and aesthetics to meet immediate concerns of contemporary professional life as an artist in first, a multiracial postcolonial cultural sphere and later, a globalized art ecology. Artists engaged in choreographic reassembly—regardless of whether they espouse the term—strive to transform the contemporary audience’s relationship with traditional practices, forms and narratives of the past so that tradition may continue to have a place in future manifestations of culture. Choreographic reassembly projects global and cosmopolitan values onto dance forms with vernacular origins and histories, in tandem with the evolving cosmopolitan milieu that practices and patronizes dance in urban Asian cities. To introduce and illustrate the concept of choreographic reassembly I offer two images in the section below.

In Indian classical dance, sequences of dance movements depict iconographic features of specific Hindu deities, their many arms carrying different kinds of tools and weapons. Classical dance pieces are constructed so that each segment displays different sets of *mudras* conveying different divine abilities. In the plastic art forms – stone sculptures and paintings, and the like – gestures depicting multiple abilities of deities are coalesced into a single image, to make the well-known and globally familiar image of the multi-armed figure, that instantly evokes Indic aesthetics. The multi-armed figure has remained a widely recognized feature of Indian aesthetics since the 14th century onward, when European travelers returned with fantastic descriptions of Indian temples that featured figures of many-armed Gods and goddesses (Mitter, 29). Varyingly considered monstrous and demonic, or elegant and evocative of classical, Greco-Roman grandeur, the many-armed idols of Indic religions have remained a fixture in Western imaginaries of South and Southeast Asia. Orientalist knowledge production in the colonial era drew much from European artists’ reproductions of idols found in living, lost and abandoned sites of Hindu and Buddhist worship across the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere—Cambodia and Bali being important Southeast Asian sites. This has left an enduring legacy of popular fascination, art-historical interest in, as well as the licit and illicit trade of, multi-armed idols, paintings and figures between South and Southeast Asia and the rest of the world. With the exception of specialists—Indologists, art historians and serious intellectuals—the specific, contextual meanings associated with Indian iconography have thus become largely glossed over or abstracted in the cross-cultural circulations of the multi-armed figure.

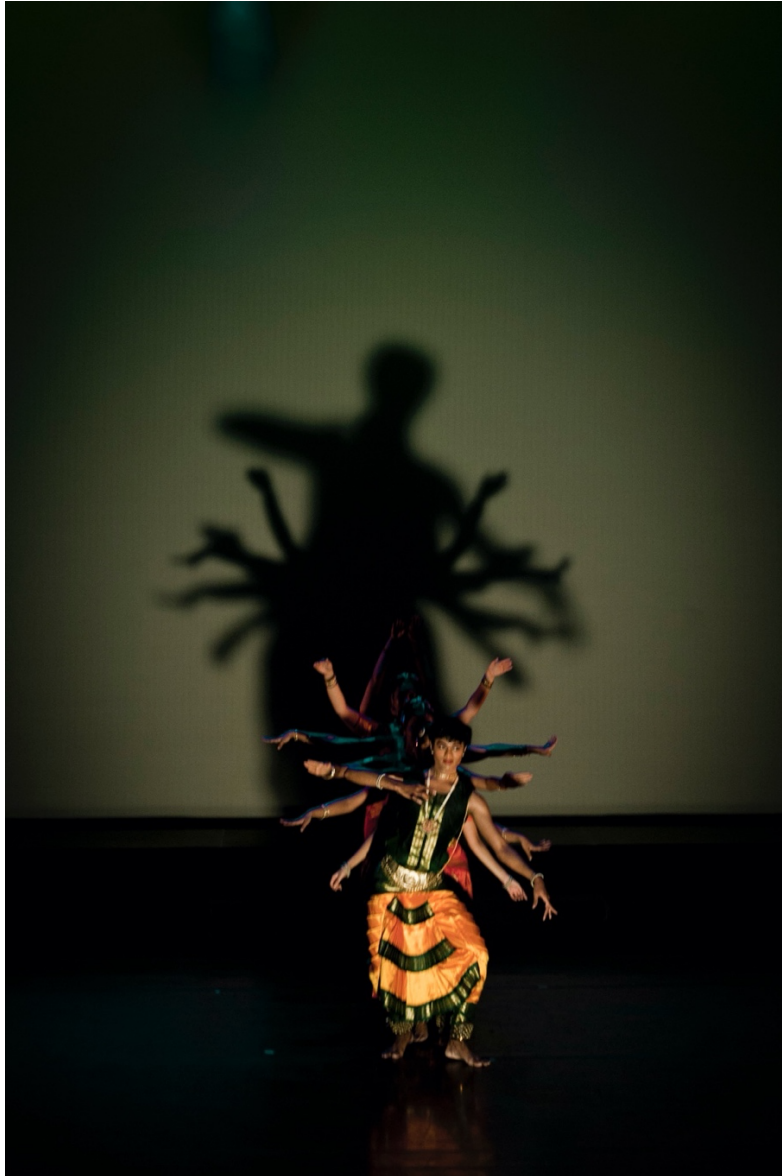


Figure 1 Dancer Gabriel Palai Anbu in "Anweshana: The Search for Nalanda". University Cultural Center, Singapore March 2011. Photograph by Abhishek Balasubramaniam

For contemporary choreographers working with Indian classical dance, the polyvalent frames cast upon the Indic multi-armed figure is not so much a problem as much as an opportunity to draw in and expand audiences beyond the numerically limited, minority Indian community in Southeast Asia. In Figures 1 and 2 choreographers Santha Bhaskar and Raka Maitra flexibly recast their dance knowledge in Bharatnatyam and Odissi respectively, to render these forms as fungible, both with Indian culture—affiliated with the Indian nation state or Indic culture linked with aesthetic forms circulating beyond the nation—and with Asia at large.

In the first image, Gabriel Palai Anbu becomes the face and body of the Boddhisatva Avalokitesvara, who is attributed with divine qualities in the Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions. As described in greater detail in Chapter 2, choreographer Santha Bhaskar worked with art-historical material on Buddhist iconography, carefully substituting or recasting the

angika—the library of gestures of the limbs (*sharīra*), face (*mukhaja*) and the entire body (*ceshtākṛita*) in classical Indian dramatic theory—to link the dance form with Buddhist narratives. In doing so the dance production *Anweshana* (2012) becomes a contemporary example of strategies taken up in the early postcolonial era, when choreographers—Bharatanatyam dancer Padma Subramaniam, Odissi masters Kelucharan Mohapatra and Debaprasad Das prominent among them—looked to ancient Sanskrit treatises and temple walls as textual and stone-sculpture archives of authentic, precolonial forms of dance from which neo-classical forms could be reassembled. However, while 20th century dance masters were engaged in reconstructing new forms of classical Indian dance through this process, Bhaskar’s choreography retains the standard features of Bharatanatyam while carefully pulling apart and repurposing elements that are already part of the form’s technical and performance ensemble. Rather than challenge Orientalist imaginaries, this image, and the choreography *Anweshana* repurpose them to loosen Indian classical dance’s long-held attachments with contemporary Hinduism emanating from the Indian nation state. Instead, both the image and the choreography perform ties with Buddhism, which in turn affectively and performatively links Singapore-made Indian dance with the many cultures across Asia that are inflected with Buddhist pasts and presents. Within Singaporean and Southeast Asian cultural diplomatic contexts, the shared Buddhist pasts recalled by the figure of the multi-armed Mahayana Bodhisattva and embodied by the Singaporean Indian Bharatanatyam dancer, render the symbolic capital of Bharatanatyam synonymous with Asian cultural capital more broadly.



Figure 2 Dancers Sandhya Suresh (above) and Carline Chin (below) for "Yahi Madhava". *The Pond Studios* Singapore, 2022. Photograph by Tan Ngiap Heng

Figure 2, shown above, taken by photographer Tan Ngiap Heng for *Chowk Productions*, plays on the familiar trope of the multi-armed figure in a different way. The photograph is part of

a series of still photos used to publicize and promote *Chowk Productions*' latest live production, *Yahi Madhava*, choreographed by Raka Maitra, which premiered between May 6 and 7, 2022 at the Stamford Arts Center Blackbox in Singapore. The photograph appropriates floating stereotypes associated with Indian dance conveyed through images of the voluptuous dancer striking a pose. The effect, created by slow shutter-speed, presents the multi-armed figure not as a still figure with many arms, but as a moving figure, whose sequential motions are captured by the photographer. Tan's photograph offers the perspective that perhaps multi-armed figures archive the dynamic, moving body, directing energy to different elements, all at once. This is a perspective of the Indic divine not as monstrous but as multiply capacitated. The photograph too, does more than one thing—not only does it reinterpret the past, but it also envisages the future of regional traditional dance. The two dancers who form the composite image are of different ethnicities, Sandhya Suresh of South Indian heritage and Carolyn Chin of Chinese ethnicity. Twin-torso-ed and mirroring each other, this ethnically and culturally composite figure performs the evolution of contemporary, globalizing, urban Asian culture in the throes of self-formation. Linked confidently with the specific dance lineage of Odissi and projecting hybrid values, their unfinished movement into each other suggests the open-ended nature of the cultural and aesthetic project of choreographic reassembly in Singapore today.

Choreographic reassembly signals a conceptual shift in modes of traditional dance analysis by eschewing the framework of spatial—Asian, African, Latin, Indian—or temporal—traditional, contemporary, modern, postmodern—genres. Non-western dance forms have also been classified within binaries that separate high and low culture—“folkloric”, “ethnic” or as distinct “world” dance forms. In doing so they are denied coevality with and excluded from the Euro-western artistic movements that in fact consolidated “contemporary” and “modern” dance genres by appropriating dance knowledges from non-western forms¹. In this shift from a focus on genre to focus on process I analyze the specifics of creative experimentation within traditional dance worlds, which can be immensely helpful in dispelling long-standing notions of innovation in contemporary culture as a Euro-American prerogative. Entanglements of circulating forms, people, political and governmental instruments and contesting regimes of value cut through and disorganize genres of choreographic work emerging today. Choreographic reassembly therefore supports the study of choreographic decision-making in relation to processes of globalization understood within the global assemblage framework, as will be elaborated upon later in this chapter.

Reassembling Singaporean Multiracialism

In 2006, a fellow dancer and I performed at a gathering for which Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first Prime Minister, was the guest of honor. At the time, the senior Lee, who held the position of Minister Mentor for the People's Action Party, was presiding over an election campaign rally for the Tanjong Pagar Group Representation Constituency (GRC²). Several cultural performances reflecting Singapore's multiracial composition were organized for the occasion, including the mainstay features of traditional Chinese, Malay and Indian dance. We

¹ See Gothschild 1988; Srinivasan 2011.

² GRCs are Singapore equivalent to counties in the United States, though considering Singapore's small size, is extends over the size of a small neighborhood.

were bedecked in Bharatanatyam finery of silk and ‘kemp’³ jewelry, paper flowers simulating fresh jasmine and *kanakambaram*⁴ garlanding our long, braided *sowris* (hair-extensions). At the time I was still a student at the National University of Singapore and a dancer trained by and performing under the guidance of Santha Bhaskar, one of Singapore’s best known Bharatanatyam dance choreographers. I remember observing the aged Minister, then already in his eighties, gazing listlessly at both of us dancers on the stage with an unmistakable expression of boredom—an expression that filled me with dread. How bad could we be? My fellow dancer and I were known in our circles as good performers; at the very least we were earnest and technically precise. We danced to a playback audio track of a song, “*Ganesha Kowthuam*,” one of the many repertoire pieces about the elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesha. Our red, *alta*⁵ lined toes pounded the hard floors of the temporary stage upon which we danced, and we remained steadfast in the character of devotees praising Ganesha, even as we sweated profusely in the tropical afternoon heat, the sun glittering off the skyscrapers of Singapore’s twenty-first century skyline rising behind our audience.

I remember feeling uneasy; perhaps it was the absence of an enthusiastic audience. Or perhaps it was the confusion I felt over my position as a non-Singaporean playing a cultural representative of the Singaporean Indian community, particularly at a domestic political rally presided over by the country’s founding Prime Minister, no less. My fellow dancer and I endeavored to do our best, but most of the audience, predominantly of ethnic Chinese origin and a handful of spectators of Malay and Indian origin, looked upon us vacantly, with indifference. This crowd, though diverse, was not discerning of traditional Indian dance and seemed to merely endure our presence politely. I had to ask myself—what were we doing there?

Given the country’s small size, different kinds of performances often occur in the same space. Indian dance performances staged at neighborhood community centers or stately proscenium stages are either patronized by members of the Indian community and made for the dancers’ friends and family or are programmed by the same venues as carefully planned features of their regular seasons and festivals. Performances created for the Indian community predominantly feature stories of gods and goddesses from the Hindu mythological and religious canon. Those programmed into the arts calendars of prestigious venues, on the other hand, usually articulate their distinction from the vernacular style, the religious content of which is translated into secular themes for spaces that offer elite cultural experiences for cosmopolitan audiences.

The anecdote above is an instance of transplanting what is known in Singapore as ‘traditional’ Indian dance from the private and community spaces of Singapore’s diasporic Indians to the national level. At that level, Bharatanatyam dance interpolates the Indian community into the fold of Singapore’s national community and thus features performances of the former kind. As a woman of Indian origin, trained and performing South Indian classical

³ Kemp is the term used to describe type of jewelry made specifically for south Indian classical dance, made with a copper alloy and different kinds of brightly colored lacquers that resemble rubies, emeralds, and pearls. This jewelry adorns, forehead, hair, neck wrist, arms and waist of the dancer and is considered a necessary part of the classical dance costume. Priya Srinivasan has rightly identified that *kemp* jewelry, along with stitched silk sari costume and the bell-studded leather ankle brace of the Bharatanatyam costume requires expert craftsmanship found only in South India, and demand for these items by Non-Resident-Indians and diaspora sustains a thriving transnational industry.

⁴ *Crossandra infundibuliformis*, sometimes called ‘the firecracker flower’, is a scentless, apricot-colored flower about the size of jasmine flowers and grows in clusters all over India.

⁵ *Alta* is a Bengali word for a red dye used by women in India to decorate fingers, palms and feet. It is conventionally made of lac, though synthetic versions are more commonly used for stage purposes.

dance, I facilitated a spectacle of ethnic and racial difference that is shaped by a long history of collective imaginings about ‘tradition’ framed within the rubric of Singaporean multiracialism, through spectacular performances of dance. This imaginary has changed between the twentieth and twenty-first century, and then, as now, is a co-production shaped by many factors and many actors, as I explore in the following pages of this dissertation. Specifically, this dissertation interrogates the constitution and transformation of this imaginary and choreographic strategies taken up by traditional dance practitioners working in Singapore between the late 1950s to the present day.

The world of Singapore-made Indian dance is not insular. Recalling the 2006 performance described earlier, traditional Indian dance performs alongside other so-called traditional dance forms, each with storied and complicated histories of their own, as well as dynamic interconnections between them. Developments in the Singaporean Indian dance world signal transitions not only in the world of global Indian dance, but also parallel changes occurring in traditional dance worlds of Malay dance, which lies directly adjacent to it, as well as traditional dance forms circulating regionally in Southeast Asia, including Thai and Indonesian dance. Alongside offering perspectives on dance as practice that shapes Singapore’s national imaginary and Singapore-made Indian dance as a unique instantiation of a globally circulating cultural practice, this dissertation also offers the concept of choreography as reassembly. Choreographic reassembly is offered here as a conceptual lens to analyze what traditional artists do today with their respective forms, forged in successive eras of colonialism, postcolonial nationalism and globalization. I focus on the assemblage of cultural production that undergirds choreographic experiments in the domain of ‘traditional dance’ in Singapore, to ask, what is the future of the traditional dancer in the contemporary Asian metropolis?

Courtly classical dance forms of South and Southeast Asia have a unique relationship with the postcolonial nation-states that have now come to patronize them. Thai or Cambodian Khon Dance, Javanese or Balinese classical dance, Sri Lankan Kandyan dance or the Indian classical dances have rightly been the subject of great deal of scholarship around the relation between dance as neo-classical embodiments of national identity. Dancers of pre-colonial Asian folk and courtly forms have, for large part of the 20th century, served a representative function for postcolonial nations, and later catered to frames cast upon them by tourism development and globalization projects. Both have had the effect of redoubling orientalist imaginaries that highlight costume, performance accoutrements and physiognomic attributes of performers as the essence of exotic difference. Singapore is no exception to this phenomenon, though, in the absence of home-grown cultural forms, it has borrowed forms of cultural expression to stage multiracial nationalism for a multiethnic population of Chinese, Indian and Malay diaspora, intentionally redirecting allegiances away from their respective nations of ancestry. More recently, since the early 2000s, in a bid to acquire global values as a knowledge capital that attracts the best in human talent from across the world, the city-state has stepped up efforts to increase investments in the project of growing its cultural capital. Towards this end, cultural policy in Singapore attends to developing both community-centric, local cultural practices, as well as artists and art companies that can engage cosmopolitan urban audiences and intensify links with centers of cultural production in Asia and the west. The state has thus emerged as the primary arts funder, investing in urban arts infrastructure and spurring local artistic creation, and its creators, to meet global artistic standards. However, the pull towards globalization projects venture capitalism values as the new model for state arts patronage.

For Singapore's minority Indian community, traditional dance forms are a practice of cultural continuity and a marker of ethnic pride within the city-state's closely regulated and siloed multiculturalism. As the world of traditional dance is relatively small, the same dancers and choreographers straddle local and global expectations levied on their work. As financial success becomes the last word on artistic survival, the priorities of traditional dancers are directed away from representing their communities and towards setting up creative businesses that can survive in this newly minted creative economy. As neoliberal instrumentation triumphs over the communitarian logic of the traditional arts, traditional dance forms thus undergo a second order of reinvention and remain open to incessant experimentation to accommodate the near future of contemporary culture in Singapore.

Method

In writing this dissertation, I write from the perspectives of dancers of Indian traditional forms in Singapore, to highlight how they negotiate contradictory expectations, apply their hard-worn knowledge of specific dance forms and frame themselves to operate successfully within a proliferating, urban and transnational arts ecology. Combining methods of ethnography, archival research, dance and performance analysis, I consider both the changes attendant upon Indian dances, as well as the attitudes dancers must adopt and the decisions they must make as they navigate the demands of and pursue their own professional goals in this complex, evolving arts ecology.

In taking on Indian dance in Singapore as my unit of analysis, I began by considering what forms of Indian concert dance appeared on Singaporean stages from local choreographic activity. It became apparent however, that stage-works could not be the sole objects of analysis; fieldwork makes apparent that Indian dance production occurs within a fluctuating space encompassing individuals and communities of practice with distinct objectives, who respond to the conditions of dance making in Singapore in different ways. For example, at *Chowk Productions* my co-practitioners and I were invested in disengaging Indian dance and its technique from overt, religious themes to invite non-Hindu and non-Indian dancers into our community of practice. Artistic director Raka Maitra's vision at *Chowk* also sought to shake off the hierarchical dynamic between dance teacher-as-guru and the student that pervaded the Indian classical dance classrooms we were trained in our childhoods, seeking instead to cultivate an egalitarian space where students would feel welcome to express themselves. However, during a panel discussion featuring classical Odissi dance teachers in Singapore, one teacher, an experienced performer in her mid-thirties, articulated without hesitation that parents and students came to her classes primarily for the immersive and embodied study of Hindu mythical stories and exposure to traditional values. These values include deference to the *guru*, forbearance in the face of bodily pain, respect for elders, discipline, forms of bodily comportment—all of which reproduced a middle-class Indian habitus. Other teachers agreed with her, though notably, the other participants besides Maitra identified first as teachers of classical Odissi dance and not primarily as choreographers. Regardless, the student community's deep and enduring attachments to the traditional Hindu worldview seemed, to me, to fly in the face of *Chowk Productions'* choreographic project to blur boundaries between tradition and contemporary Indian dance in Singaporean and global artistic discourse. Contradictory voices from within the Indian dance community suggest that Indian dance making is not structurally circumscribed by either the state, or the market or cultural expectations, but that there are several elements in the

mix. Ethnography and sustained, daily interaction with the dance community has thus strongly shaped this project.

The dance analyst of evolving Asian dance forms must consider the dynamic interplay of disciplinary and regulatory forces—religion, family, market and state, as well as a range of desired outcomes that practitioners harbor. I therefore consider Singaporean Indian dance making and makers at multiple scales of analysis, tracking experiences of the choreographer as artist, as national icon who represents a minority, sub-national community and as a cosmopolitan figure circulating transnationally. I have since attended dance events in studio, stage, and classroom settings, followed choreographers into meeting rooms with private and state donors, to boardrooms with art managers and curators, censors and auditors, and to conferences and symposia where they articulate the work they do and the problems confronting them. In the resulting dissertation, I intend to showcase the junctures at which creative practice becomes entangled with projects at the national and transnational level.

My project does not remain just an ethnography of dance-making, however. I apply the understandings I have gathered from the field to analyzing stage work, which I do to rethink how we think about work rooted in traditional dance forms emerging from Asia. Following the choreographic processes at various stages between inception and presentation reveals the influence of both transnational actors— influential dancers and dance masters, independent producers and festival directors and art managers working out of various cultural embassies, circulating between Singapore, India and beyond. These figures incentivize dancers to adapt their creative impulses according to available opportunity, and to frame their final presentations to suit different kinds of theatrical publics at the local, national and transnational scale. The cases that I feature thus consider different kinds of work that emerge when intervening institutions and intended audiences differ and the extent to which these works may be viable beyond the local context.

Stakes

The stakes of this project are double: to center minority Indian performance in Singapore, and to centering Singaporean Indian Dance on the world stage. I found it tempting to write this study of Indian dance as an exploration of minority identity performance within the national frame of Singapore. Traditional dance practices have had little attention cast upon them, as a majority of arts funding is directed to English language theatre, westernized ballet and contemporary dance, all of these fields shaped by affluent, elite, Chinese-Singaporean practitioners, patrons and audiences. Scholarship around the arts in Singapore, too, largely ignores the world of traditional dance, focusing instead on the resistive politics of Singapore's late twentieth century visual art, bilingual Chinese-English, and English language theatre scenes, which consolidated a local artistic Avant Garde. In these late twentieth century writings, traditional performance in Singapore has appeared as a field of minority identity performance and as the spectacular ideological ground of the authoritarian state's machinations of multicultural cultural production. Since race operates in Singapore as a bureaucratic construct that groups and governs differences among ethnic Chinese, Malay and Indian citizens, Indian and Malay traditional performing arts are funded within the logic of protecting minority cultural expression as a form of national heritage rather than as a site of innovative artistic production. This prevailing attitude on the traditional arts as static, parochial and therefore uninteresting forms of 'community art' explains why the field slips under the radar of mainstream critical

reflection. The result is a paradox, traditional dance forms suffuse Singapore's visual culture, appearing in national day parades, tourism board campaigns, promotional features in magazines for upcoming performances and as enormous, glass-encased posters in bus stops and underground metropolitan walkways—but next to nothing has been written about these forms till recently, outside of small publications funded by small community associations and performing art schools.

Traditional dance is also marginal to the new mainstream of artistic production in Singapore, which instead focuses on cosmopolitan performances that are legible within liberal humanist and progressive political paradigms that shape the global contemporary art world. As performance studies scholar Hentyle Yapp argues, the major and the mainstream in any socio-cultural formation, instantiates its own political economy; reifying representations of the minor as one thing or the other. “The logic of the major” Yapp argues, limits “which objects circulate, which methods are appropriate, which political and materialist frames dominate, and which mechanisms mediate the circulation of objects” (2). Ongoing formal innovations and aesthetic processes in the minor world of traditional dance enter scholarly and critical arts discourses, only when traditional artists explicitly link their aesthetic projects to resistance. Works ‘cross-over’ from the domain of the racialized world of traditional dance in Singapore to the cosmopolitan, major performance of the contemporary, are explicit about their liberal politics, and perform their resistance to authoritarian orders of the state or tradition.

This trope of rescue is a familiar trope that replicates an older, colonial logic of salvaging the native. As Yapp clarifies, liberal humanist political projects of the global contemporary art world actively showcase works that resuscitate the minor subject from oppression within their own communities and restores them into the margins of mainstream cultural and political orders. To quote Yapp again, “...the entrenched argument that non-Western art is worthy of inclusion and valuable for demonstrating resistant agency against the strong state repeats static formulations of subjects, culture, and the state and reinforces the logics of liberalism, modern humanism, and capitalism,” the ethics of which are considered universally applicable (6). Artists and works highlighted in this dissertation instead straddle complex and divergent moral worlds, doing the important, often unrewarded work of bridging and sustaining critical conversations around ethical issues between the liberal domain of the art world and the conservative domains of state and ethnic community—the latter being primary patrons for their art forms. Rather than performing the token minority artist within Singapore's emerging contemporary art world, they instead “stay with the trouble” as Donna Haraway suggests, offering minor methods of expanding the artistic mainstream. Implicit in “engaging minorly” as Yapp suggests, is to hesitate from occupying positions offered to minority artists but to go against the grain of all imposed classifications. This dissertation examines such minor moves in a moment when efforts of artists like the ones I describe are yet to coalesce into a clear cultural formation or artistic movement. At such a moment, I offer this dissertation as a way of paying attention to the methods taken to reframing and disrupting tired stereotypes around the tradition in the arts and look to choreography as reassembly, as forms of careful experimentation and solving problems of cultural globalization through choreography.

Singapore-made Indian dance also occupies a minor position in the discourse of Indian dance around the world. I offer this study to expand the conversation on “the classical” and “the traditional” in global Indian dance, a field that is plagued by notions of purity and lineage, both of which limit democratic forms of participation. Traditional dance from Southeast Asia is also almost entirely invisible in ongoing debates in the expanding field of contemporary Southeast

Asian artistic production. I offer the perspectives of traditional performing artists who have much to offer in shaping an Asia-centric and inter-Asia perspective on global contemporary art and culture. Plastic and installation art fields dominate in discourses of “the contemporary” in South, Southeast and East Asian high culture, even as the performing arts remain dynamic sites that attract participants from a wider range of class and gender positions. Traditional performing artists especially are often dismissed as valuable contributors to discussions on contemporary culture, due to their affiliations with conservative, often religious traditions that often frustrate cherished liberal humanist values that shape the contemporary visual and performance arts fields. Moreover, traditional dance worlds—Malay and Indian dance especially—are spaces overwhelmingly constituted by women, into which queer or otherwise gender-nonconforming people are welcomed. I offer a perspective on artists who are subject to conflicting value regimes of their respective traditional/classical dance worlds, of the contemporary art market in which they inadvertently compete for attention and for funding, and whose choreographic strategies, as well as their choices as artists and as people make them worthy of attention beyond their social and professional position as minor.

The Question of Traditional Dance in Contemporary Asia

In writing this dissertation, I found myself slipping between the terms “classical” and “traditional” with reference to Bharatanatyam and Odissi, the two Indian dance forms under discussion within these pages. I also found myself grappling with the slippage between “traditional” as a way of life and as a genre of dance. When the term tradition is invoked by dancers, choreographers, art managers, bureaucrats and politicians working in Singapore, which “tradition” are they talking about and why? As Indian dance scholar Pallabi Chakravorty states, dichotomous concepts which organize non-western dance discourse, “like tradition/past and modernity/present (are) obviously a simplification of complex processes of historical evolutions of ideas and practices and continuities and ruptures; so, this binary is simply a heuristic device” (40). The term ‘tradition’ has specific meanings in the social and artistic domains and is primarily understood in this dissertation in two ways – firstly as forms of knowledge, practice and social relations and secondly as a genre of performing art. Understandings of tradition, both as a product of knowledge and power structures as well as an artistic genre, shaped by the colonial and later, by neoliberal governmental forms, are significant to the present discussion. In the following section, I address the entanglements around the constructed category of tradition and the real implications they have for non-western dancers working in Asia today.

As Nicholas Dirks has argued, “tradition”, like the categories of ‘custom’ or ‘folk,’ distinguished practices that could be separated from the domain of religion proper⁶, the latter sanctioned by authoritative texts. Such distinctions anthropologized colonized society into newly produced, simplified categories by which they could be governed. This type of knowledge production domesticated “the vastly complex codes and their associated meanings to a few metonyms...India was redefined by the British to be a place of rules and orders; once the British had defined to their own satisfaction what they construed as Indian rules and customs, then the Indians had to conform to these construction” (Dirks, 9-10). Spears and Meduri, in discussing the

⁶ While British administration in India and Singapore came to adopt a non-interference policy in religious matters, they most certainly regulated religious practice and expression by producing standard forms that could be verified in religious texts. Customs and other practices without basis in text were considered inauthentic and corruptions of true traditions thus could be curtailed (Dirks, 9-10)

invention of Bharatanatyam as a form of tradition and neo-classicism, have argued that colonial knowledge production of this type “cut off incipient modernities at its roots” recasting the socially non-normative, artistically dynamic and culturally flexible communities of performing artists—the “*nautch*-girl” and the ‘devadasi’⁷—as criminal castes engaged in prostitution, whose practices had departed from authentic traditions of performance described in Sanskrit texts like the *Natyasasthra* and *Abhinayadarpana* (436).

Parallely, in the Singapore case, Vineeta Sinha has argued that forms of worship and religious celebration brought to Singapore by the Indian labor diaspora were classified as ‘folk’ Hinduism by the colonial and later, postcolonial government, since they did not have a textual basis in *Agamic* or Vedic literature that had set the standard for ‘official Hinduism’ formalized under British rule (“Problematizing Received Categories” 98-109). As a result, the colonially inflected discourse of ‘tradition’ in Singapore works as a corrective to these so-called folk practices, particularly ones that were public and attached mass participation, therefore threatening colonially imposed order. As I discuss further in Chapter 1, *Taipuṣam* and *Theemiti*, in particular were understood as uncivilized practices, without basis in text and therefore inauthentic forms of tradition. Bharatnatyam and other Indian classical dances were considered performances of authentic tradition, linked with the highest order of Indian civilization and legitimated by institutions of the mid-century Indian nation-state. Traditional dance, I go on to argue, has thus entered Singapore’s Indian sociocultural domain because of limits imposed upon other performative forms of religious expression in the public domain. Its function thus extends beyond providing entertainment and artistic value.

In postcolonial Asian nations, elite performing art forms associated with precolonial royal courts and religious institutions have become the preserve of traditional life-worlds. This is the case even as modern forms of sociality, market calculations, state patronage and standardized, democratized forms of pedagogy have completely transformed actual features of precolonial artistic life⁸—direct royal patronage, personal social and often conjugal relationships between dancer and patron, caste-bound inheritance of performing arts knowledges and closely policed boundaries of practice. The last element, the policing of boundaries is exercised most notably through the *guru-shishya parampara* (teacher-student lineage), where masters select students worthy of training at their discretion with the intention of passing knowledge intact from one generation to the next. While the *guru-shishya parampara* is the most obvious aspect of traditional artistic lifestyles that remain preserved in contemporary practices of traditional dance, it is also an aspect that is questioned by the current generation of dancers as I address in chapters 3 and 4.

Traditional dance is a product of colonial modernity, but also of modernization practices, which Bruno Latour suggests, either tend towards translation which mixes things up to create hybrids, or towards purification, which creates distinct orders of the natural and the human (10-11). Genres of Asian traditional dances performed the natural or essentialized representations of precolonial societies for new postcolonial nations in the twentieth century. Avanti Meduri and Matthew Isaac Cohen respectively have argued that Indian and Indonesian classical dances are

⁷ Spears and Meduri discuss how a diversity of professional performing women, often linked with hereditary artistic communities came to be known as ‘nautch’ girls in colonial English society. The term “nautch” is an Anglicization of *naach*, noun and verb form for the word ‘dance’ in Urdu and Hindi. The term *devadasi* refers specifically to dancers patronized by South Hindu temples, and there were both artistic and ritual functions to their labor (Spears and Meduri, 437-438)

⁸ See Gaston (1996), Marglin (1980), Kersenboom-Story (1987), Anurima Bannerji (2012).

products of disruptive modernization processes in the twentieth century. In the case of Bharatanatyam in particular, Meduri has suggested that Rukmini Devi Arundale, a key figure of its reinvention, worked to negotiate a form of local modernity for elite- and middle-class Indians through performance (“Bharatanatyam as a Global Dance” 12). A range of traditional dance styles including several Indian classical forms, Thai and Cambodian Khon dance, and various Indonesian courtly styles share this foundational history. Purification processes in the twentieth-century Indian context included production of categories in which dance forms with histories of royal or other forms of high cultural patronage—Kathak, Odissi, Bharatanatyam, Manipuri, etc.—were placed on the mantle of tradition proper as expressions of Indian classicisms. Meanwhile, folk dance forms—*dandiya*, *bhangra*, *garbha*, etc. —and cinematic dance forms created for the Mumbai-based and regional Indian film industries came to be seen as vernacular and commercial styles respectively, and thus denied systematic support from the state and other elite cultural institutions⁹. A whole other spectrum of dance styles rooted in the early to mid-twentieth-century Indian modernist art movement have remained niche forms and only recently come into popular awareness and scholarly interest. Purkayastha has identified that modernism in Indian dance, often considered as a ‘fusion’ of vernacular forms with western styles are “viewed (as) bastardised and illegitimate form(s) without any history or precedent, not considered representative of the highest and the best in Indian culture, since it is unable to uphold an unbroken tradition as the classical dances supposedly do” (4-5).

Following my above review of tradition as a product of fraught colonial history and an uninterrogated organizing concept in discussions on dances of the non-western world, a question remains: what explains the deep emotional attachments that artists and dance audiences, traditionalists and experimentalists alike, retain for these invented dance forms? A third perspective considers tradition as more than just the byproduct and hence the other face of colonial modernity, but as practices that register successive orders of social transformation. This third perspective I draw from Anthony Giddens, who suggests that notions of authentic tradition exist as much in post-imperial societies as much as they do in postcolonial ones, and therefore tradition cannot be equated with westernization. Giddens goes on to say that tradition tells us something about collective memory registered in shared, social practices that “involves ritual; is connected with what I call a ‘formulaic notion of truth’; has ‘guardians’ and unlike custom has a binding force which has combined moral and emotional content” (63). In Chapter 1, I argue that in the mid-twentieth century, the Bharatanatyam studio became a site where both the working class, colonial Indian labor diaspora and the elite, administrative class of Indians interacted and collectively negotiated the terms of Indian tradition. Dance classrooms and stages were thus sites where both traditional pasts and postcolonial futures could be negotiated and reiterated through practice and performance, and thus had a role to play in the integration of the colonial Indian labor diaspora of old Malaya into the fold of Singaporean cultural citizenship. Such a consensus on tradition, is also a consensus on collective memory, what aspects of precolonial history is remembered and what aspects, particularly convict and ‘coolie’ histories are forgotten. In Chapter 3, I argue that the same value that traditional dance brings to its respective ethnic communities is disrupted by aspirations for a globally networked local arts scene with standards set elsewhere.

Choreographers and their communities of practice therefore negotiate and contest the meanings that traditional dance, invented or not, can take in this new era of globalization. I offer choreographic reassembly as a conceptual lens through which to observe this negotiation. While

⁹ See Sarkar-Munsi (2010) and Chakravorty (2017)

traditional dance masters were once revered for their deep and thorough knowledge of precise dance technique and ritualized conventions of their form, in the contemporary art ecology, it is not mastery, but expertise that is valued. In this “ecology of expertise¹⁰” knowledge is abstracted and refined into smaller and smaller bytes that can be applied towards other ends besides the performance of collective memory and social reproduction. How do the new experts work with traditional dance technique as material for contemporary dance works? What are the contestations that arise between old masters and new experts, roles that are often cast upon and coalesce in the same individual choreographers? In this dissertation, figures like K.P. and Santha Bhaskar, whose works are described in the Chapter 1 and 2, and Pichet Klunchun, a Thai Khon dancer, who makes a brief appearance in the final chapter, have precariously balanced both epithets, while artists like Raka Maitra, whose works are analyzed in parts of Chapters 3 and 4, as well as a new generation of Malay dancers at P7:SMA and Bhumi Productions, January Low and Rianto claim expertise but not mastery. Performance analysis, informed by ethnographic engagement, therefore suggests choreographers and dancers of traditional forms exercise dance knowledges flexibly in different contexts, within a range of possibilities offered by the conditions of cultural production in Asia today.

Global versus Transnational

A major point of departure for this project was to consider Indian classical dance in Singapore in relation to globalization. Dance scholars since the early 2000s have declared Indian classical dance, primarily Bharatanatyam, as being “at home in the world¹¹”, as a globally recognized form, with audiences and practitioners that transcend national boundaries. Avanti Meduri and Janet O’ Shea also argue that Bharatanatyam was always already global, in the sense that prominent figures involved in the form’s mid-century reinvention were transnational figures with transnational personal networks and institutional links, and thus amalgamated both Indian and global sensibilities into the form¹². Yet the archive of Bharatanatyam performance in Singapore since the 1950s reveals Indian dance history in Singapore to have evolved along a parallel, related but distinct track from Indian Bharatanatyam. This provokes the question—is there such a thing as global Indian dance? Though there is undoubtedly a globally recognized form of Bharatanatyam, Odissi and the other Indian classical dances, local factors clearly shape Indian dance practice differently in different sites. What are the features, then, that lend the Indian classical dances “global” values? Where and how does the global interact with the local production of dance—be it Indian, broadly “traditional”, experimental, or contemporary”—in Singapore? What are the networks along which global standards of dance and performance practice circulate and shape new, localized dance worlds in the process?

Recent studies of the globalization of the form focus on how Indian ‘classical’ dance now form part of social reproduction practices for Indian nationals, transnationals and diaspora,

¹⁰ Aihwa Ong describes new forms of governmentality in Asia that shapes knowledge production by complex interactions between local and transnational actors with varied forms of expertise. Ecologies of expertise are “techno-administrative zone that depends on novel combinations of mobile knowledge and actors connected to diverse sites” (“Ecology of Expertise” 339)

¹¹ See reference for O’Shea’s monograph, *At Home in the World: Bharatanatyam on the Global Stage*.

¹² See reference for Meduri, “Bharatanatyam as a global dance: some issues in research, teaching, and practice”.

largely marginal to mainstream culture in in the United Kingdom and North America¹³. In contrast, in Singapore, as in the case of Malaysia¹⁴, Sri Lanka¹⁵ and Bangladesh¹⁶, Bharatanatyam and other related classical dances have been attached to mainstream imaginaries of the nation. This feature is rooted in histories of circulation between the South-eastern coast of India and Malaya, cross the Bay of Bengal. The globalization of Indian dance clearly has had other lines of flight beyond the trajectory that links the twentieth century Indian nation state with the Euro-American Indian diaspora. Global instantiations of “Contemporary Indian Dance” today also betray a proliferation of different artists who espouse this moniker also espouse a diversity of approaches to their art, use a variety of techniques and betray a wide range of political and aesthetic commitments, as I will elaborate in a later section of this introduction.

Considering that new works from around the world rooted in Indian classical dance do not coalesce into a single genre with shared features, I propose that we rethink the globalization of Indian dance beyond existing generic classifications. Indian dance’s innumerable, mutated incarnations on the global stage is enabled not just by circulating transnational and diasporic Indians, but by the dynamic and flexible nature of the dance forms themselves, which are composed by both standard and mutable elements. I think of Indian dance as a ‘global form’, Collier and Ong’s term for forms of thought and practice that circulate around the world, characterized by both fixed elements that give them their standard character, as well as mutable elements that render them fluid and adaptable (5). Global forms could be artistic practices, western classical ballet for instance, entities like the multinational corporations or technologies of government such as neoliberalism, socialism, etc. Globalization thought through the contextual model of global assemblages, suggests analysis of ‘contingent entanglement of situated and global elements, that is, as particular assemblages of interrelationships’ (A. Ong “Scales of Exception” 120). Importantly, globalization is viewed not as a homogenizing process of westernization, but rather as the interaction of global forms and factors that shape particular contexts. The globalization of vernacular dance forms thus takes place by the conscious and deliberate reassembly of situated and global elements that affect dance practice in urban Asian sites and I call this choreographic reassembly.

Odissi and Bharatanatyam—the two Indian dance forms that are featured in this dissertation—can be considered global forms because they circulate in stages and studios around the world with recognizable features. Costume, dance technique and pedagogical drills, canons and repertoire of performance—are largely standardized. Communities of practice, from guru to dancer to audience, are invested in maintaining these standard features intact, as they make classical dance forms both instantly recognizable and distinct. Standard features are further reinforced by forms of examination and certification of dancers at the levels of beginner, novicehood and expert. Much of the claims around the inherent conservatism of traditional dance stems from this desire to maintain the standard features of forms, particularly when South Asian classical dance forms are so closely related and uninitiated audiences can hardly distinguish Odissi from Bharatanatyam beyond obvious differences in costume. In Chapter 4, Thai dancer Pichet Klunchun, who experiments with Khon dance, raises this shared instinct for preservation and gatekeeping practices within the Thai dance world as impediments to making the form more

¹³ Meduri writes on the the transfiguration of Indian/Asian Dance in the United Kingdom (“The transfiguration of the Indian/Asian dancer” , whereas Priya Srinivasan discusses North American Indian classical dance practices.

¹⁴ See Premalatha Thiagarajan (2012)

¹⁵ See Ahalya Satgunaratnam (2013)

¹⁶ See Munjulika Rahman

relatable to new generations of audiences. Klunchun, like dancers in Singapore, therefore, experiment at the edge of the stable and the mutable in traditional dance technique and convention, arguing that the factors that necessitated the exact replication of standard features in a previous era have now lapsed. Choreographic reassembly is therefore the deliberate reshuffling and play with conventional and unconventional elements in a given traditional dance form and is also a response to transformations in the context of cultural production in different sites. The results of choreographic reassembly are open ended, contingent both on artistic choice and on given circumstances.

In Singapore, overwhelmingly dance has been shaped, and continues to be shaped by the enduring effects of colonialism and entrepreneurialism and the two halves of this dissertation is roughly organized along these lines. The colonial assemblage relates to issues discussed in the earlier section on the question of tradition in Singapore-made Indian dance. Elements include colonial forms of knowledge and representation—the British colonial administration’s loosely defined ethno-racial categorization techniques to govern difference in Malaya, as well as the temporalizing of different ways of life across Britain’s former colonies as either being of the past or as progressive, i.e., as traditional, or modern. Such racialized and temporalized categories of thought inform how Indian and other traditional dances are represented on the South and Southeast Asian stages today. The standard features of traditional dance technique and performance, as well as the dance training institutions first set up in the early postcolonial era to defend and oversee the careful, intergenerational replication of these standards also form part of the colonial assemblage, as does the deep cultural conservatism and resistance to experimentation. The entrepreneurial assemblage on the other hand, refers to those elements shaping the professional life of artists in urban southeast Asia that draw enterprising dancers and choreographers to risk the ire of the traditional dance communities and stake out a place as creative entrepreneurs in the art market. Singaporean style governance in the twenty-first century, which bear standard features of neoliberal doctrine and practice that circulate globally, is a foundational and overdetermining factor in the entrepreneurial assemblage and has important effects in Singapore’s reworking of traditional dance practice. A detailed discussion on how Creative Industries policy (CI) shapes artistic practice today warrants some discussion. I undertake this discussion in Chapter 1 and go on to articulate its effects in choreography in Chapters three and four.

Demands, Desires and Decisions: Indian Dancers and Flexible Citizenship

Between October 2018 and February 2019, Chowk Productions’ professional calendar involved the following: traditional Odissi dance recitals in two local community centers, a free, open-air performance, of, again traditional Odissi for Deepavali celebrations at in Singapore’s Little India district, a small-scale staging of an experimental, non-traditional work-in-progress choreographed by two younger company dancers, which they hoped would be being picked up by arts programmers attached to more prestigious local venues, a company tour to India to stage a full-length non-traditional production, *Pallavi with Stillness* at Asoka University in New Delhi and Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata, and a teaching workshop at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, Adelaide, where *Chowk’s* artistic director, Raka Maitra, shared aspects of the novel method of dance training she had developed, with the students at the Western Australian institute of Performing Arts. In each of these contexts, members of Chowk productions are called to both sharpen their mastery of the traditional form even as they continue

to build and maintain a repertoire of experimental works for the transnational, contemporary art market. While social and political critique often forms the thematic content of experimental work, the state's close surveillance and regulation of creative production through funding limits, most often tacitly, what forms these critical choreographies can take. In each of these different contexts, the dancer navigates dizzying range of distinct and intersecting value regimes, flexibly exercising choice to meet their own desires for professional success and creative expression, taking decisions regarding opportunities presented, while meeting the demands imposed upon them.

What is the figure of the choreographer that emerges from these interactions? As I entered into fieldwork, my view of the professional dancer and choreographer swung dramatically between that of the cynical artist—attuned to the rhythms of funding cycles and performing arts-markets, bent upon success at all costs— and that of the marginalized artist, striving to preserve dying dance forms that are fading into irrelevance as ‘the arts’ goes global in Singapore. In retrospect, I see that such a bipolar view can be sustained only if considering art, like politics, as projects of totalization, that have the capacity to confer agency through free expression or activism (or to retract this agency through curtailing of the same). In the chapters that follow, the figure that emerges appears pragmatic, not cynical, negotiating with multiple regimes of power – nation-state, capital and community—to realize their artistic visions on stage. Flexibility, as described by Ong, refers to the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions. In their quest to accumulate capital and social prestige in the global arena keen actors choose to engage in practices favoring flexibility, mobility, and repositioning relation to markets, governments, and cultural regimes. Ong describes that these logics and practices are produced within particular structures of meaning about family, gender, nationality, class mobility and social power (“Flexible Citizenship” 7).

Bharatanatyam, the primary style of Indian traditional dance practiced in Singapore, is a form of cultural education and a hobby for a vast number of its regular practitioners. As epitomized by the popular, public persona of dancer-choreographer Santha Bhaskar described in Chapter 1, Bharatanatyam dancers embody middle-class Indian moral codes for femininity. In temples and community centers, young adolescent women train for the better part of a whole year, following over ten years of sustained education in the form for their *arangetrams* (debut performances), where they are qualified by discerning members of the dancing community as good dancers and by non-dancers as models of Indian womanhood. As explored in Chapter 1 and 2, however, the labor of dancing— for pleasure and for forging affective communal bonds—is also transformed into cultural capital for the nation. National level spectacles of large numbers of traditionally trained dancers dancing together, and various ethnic groups dancing one after the other, rehearsed and materialized the collective, national body, in which differences in cultural paradigms could ‘mix without combining’ with each other (Goh 236). In the interplay between situated political aspirations that promote an ethos of entrepreneurialism, and the enduring force of family and community to shape individual behavior, new spaces emerge for the dancer to explore possibilities of professional success, new forms of community leadership, and techniques of self-fashioning through performance. In this dissertation I therefore maintain that creativity and choreographic experimentation in Singapore emerges from *within*, not despite, the contingencies of adapting to varied disciplining and regulating forces.

Within dance scholarship, some compelling studies by Anusha Kedhar and Priya Srinivasan have addressed how dancers negotiate the contradictory demands of transnational

Indian classical dance production and their desires for artistic success by making choreographic decisions. Below I address the provocations and utility offered by both these scholars with respect to my project. Kedhar's work is an ethnography of classically trained dancers from India, who move between Bangalore and London. She frames their work as transnational affective labor that sustains and reveals the contradictions between race and citizenship within British multiculturalism. Kedhar applies the concept of flexible citizenship as Ong does, to indicate it as the transnational practice of reimagining "Indianness" on stage, across and between sites of cultural production in India and the United Kingdom. Here, Indian dancers capitalize on their mastery of dance and the demand for trained Indian dancers in London's dance scene for their ability to diversify the British stage. Kedhar then extends Ong's notion of flexibility to discuss the term more literally, to consider the bodily limits of flexibility when dancers who are trained in Indian classical forms like Kathak or Bharatanatyam must also struggle to learn and accommodate ballet and modern dance choreography to meet the demands of these multicultural dance companies and their stage productions.

However, Kedhar also considers flexibility in David Harvey's sense of flexible accumulation, drawing convincing comparisons between transnational labor distribution trends in the dance world to those in other industries. Here, the world of contemporary high art is characterized as being no longer concentrated in European cultural centers, but as dispersed by globalization. The raw materials—i.e., forms of representation, techniques of practice and culture workers—and final products are scattered across the world. Kedhar presents dancers from India as rendered helplessly nomadic by the capitalist underpinnings of the global culture industries and having to negotiate visa regimes that are hostile to Indian passports, even as they supply affective labor to sustain British multiculturalism, at the cost of their own bodily capacity to move and stretch, so to speak. However, Kedhar pays less attention to the processes of culture and dance making in India, and that beyond financial incentives, dancers in India also seek advantages associated with living and working as artists in the United Kingdom. A new generation of Indian dancers view western cultural metropolises like London, Berlin and the like as fostering a dynamic and experimental arts-scene, in contrast to dance-world conservatism that reigns as a kind of ethos in New Delhi, Chennai, and to a lesser extent, Bangalore. Dancers also invest in or secure scholarships for residencies, workshops and degree-granting programs in European and American cities, and utilize these to expand their practice, their network, and process new works that can then be showcased as novel creations for Indian stages and beyond. Dancers circulating between India and Singapore are also engaged in similar transactions of knowledge and capital.

Priya Srinivasan also considers the transnational dimensions of Indian dance and more keenly studies dancers as cultural laborers circulating between India and the United States. Srinivasan intersperses and interrupts her ethnographic reports with historical narratives about itinerant Indian dance and music performers in the United States in the early 20th century, whose performances and exotic appeal exerted enormous influence upon the white-female progenitors of American modern dance. In her monograph, *Sweating Saris*, Srinivasan considers herself an 'unruly spectator' rather than an ethnographer, who contextualizes the reports of her informants for the reader within the broader landscape of American dance history. While historical contextualization is important, such juxtapositions in fact reveal the stark contrast between historical and contemporary circulations of Indian classical dance transnationally between India and the United States. Firstly, there are too few cases of early 20th century Indian performing artists in the U.S. for it to be comparable to the present-day scale of practice. Secondly, the class

and caste position of the earlier performers, as well as the aggressive business tactics of the impresarios that directed their itineraries, gave them little agency in setting the terms of their labor and mobility. This is unlike dancers today, who often hail from elevated class and caste positions, and circulate in social networks that reward and affirm these positions. Indian dancers travelling to the US historically also were not individually famous—their names and their origins in India are largely unknown. In contrast, dancers circulating between India and the United States compete for fame and renown, and some acquire considerable star-power that can fill up concert halls around the world.

Regardless, Srinivasan's ethnography offers valuable insights. Primarily conducted in Indian dance schools in California, it shows that dance practitioners, gurus and students alike are engaged in acquiring and cementing an elevated, socio-cultural minority status in the U.S. by the active display of alterity, preserving strict artistic discipline and preserving exact technique so as to nurture culturally coded valuations of Indian femininity, including proper public behavior for women, values of endogamy, Hindu devotion and filial piety manifested as ceremonial acts of respect and submission to the authority of parents, guru and God. Thus, according to Srinivasan, the practice is about negotiating social position and maintaining heteronormative, patriarchal Indian values. Srinivasan also indicates that these values are challenged and negotiated by all agents concerned, and the provision for this challenge remains latent in historical Indian temple dance forms from which most contemporary practices of classical Indian dance emerge. Srinivasan draws our attention to several poems from the original temple dance repertoire that are widely taught and performed today, which extolls, archives and, as Srinivasan argues, personifies the lifestyle of the *devadasi* or temple dancer, which stands in flagrant alterity to that of the chaste ideal of the Indian wife and mother.

Chapter breakdown

Each chapter of this dissertation explores choreographic reassembly as a feature of experiments in traditional Indian and other non-western dance in Singapore. The first two chapters discuss choreographic reassembly in relation to the colonial assemblage. In the first chapter, I focus on historical and prevailing attitudes on “tradition” and traditional dance in Singapore as an effect of colonial modernity—governmental forms, technological advancements and forms of disciplining and managing labor circulating between colonial India and Malaya. The second chapter discusses how reassembly remains a feature in Singapore-made Bharatanatyam choreography today in the context of Inter-Asia cultural dynamics. The third chapter explores a new generation of traditional Indian and Malay dancers presenting work in Singapore who critically rethink the genre of traditional dance that recycles Orientalist stereotypes and conservative cultural tropes. Choreographic reassembly here takes on an anticipatory mode as artists continue to be funded as traditional, intuiting the future of tradition in an arts ecology that is increasingly suffused by progressive liberal values of the global contemporary art world. The fourth chapter rethinks choreographic reassembly in contemporary Asian choreography as processes of careful cross-generic experimentation in various dance, theatre and movement forms. A detailed breakdown follows.

Chapter One: Surrogating Singaporean Multiracialism

Is the presence of Bharatanatyam in Singapore and the Bharatanatyam dancer's iconic power to invoke Singaporean-Indian identity just another story of the globalization of Bharatanatyam? The first chapter situates how reassembly has been a feature of choreographic experiments since the earliest days of Bharatanatyam's practice in Singapore by studying the work of Singapore's Indian dance pioneers K.P. and Santha Bhaskar. The Bhaskars' career is anomalous in Indian dance history, as they move from espousing Indian modern dance to taking up classical Indian dance, now canonized in Singaporean cultural history today as ideal representatives of Singaporean Indian cultural citizenship. This chapter does two kinds of work: first is to identify two early choreographies by Santha Bhaskar and her husband K.P. Bhaskar in the 1950s as early instantiations of choreographic reassembly, working as they did prior to the spread of standardized forms of Bharatanatyam emanating from India. Second, I link K.P. Bhaskar's professional career prior to his arrival in Singapore as properly located within histories of Indian modern dance, a genre constituted by a range of choreographic experiments beginning in early and mid-twentieth India. Indian modern dance choreographers' methodological commitments to what Prarthana Purkayastha calls "chemical synthesis" *roshonik sanghmishron* aligns well with notions of choreographic reassembly I present here (143). Secondly, I consider the contextual factors that influenced the popularity of Indian classical dance in Singapore, namely, the local Indian diaspora's status as a stigmatized minority, inflected by difficult histories of indentured servitude and plantation labor. The Bhaskars' shift from modern to classical or traditional dance can thus be read as an adaptive move in response to the demands of their Indian student base in Singapore, who were keen to participate in the civilizational discourses generated in early nationalist India. I use Joseph Roach's concept of surrogation to make my argument; as figures who stood for Indian tradition, both in artistic and social circles, over the course of a six-decade long career, this chapter considers the continued resonance that invented tradition retains over Singapore's Indian imaginary.

Chapter Two: Bharatanatyam and Buddhist Diplomacy

While the first chapter considers how Bharatanatyam came to represent Singaporean Indian national imaginaries, this one looks at a more recent, second phase of repurposing the iconic power of the Indian dancing-body for inter-Asia projects linked to Singapore, as illustrated by the image of the multi-armed figure discussed in the opening segment of this introduction. Here, the state seeks to strengthen South, East and Southeast Asian diplomatic ties based on shared Buddhist history and calls upon its Indian dancers to lend their iconicity to this cause. Several high-profile stage productions, primarily, Santha Bhaskar's work with *Anweshana: The Search for Nalanda* (2011), have featured Mahayana Buddhist themes, iconography and narratives. I review *Anweshana* as one among a handful of other choreographies in which the Hindu-Indian values conventionally associated with Bharatanatyam are detached and relinked to Buddhist or otherwise pan-Asian histories and cosmologies, through choreographic reassembly. This chapter then goes on to consider how Buddhist themes re-enter into transnational Bharatanatyam discourse through Singapore. Buddhist themes in Bharatanatyam today open the culturally conservative world of Indian classical dance to new audiences, new geographies and new kinds of cultural and political affiliations. Inventive mutations of Bharatanatyam by Singapore's diaspora through choreographic reassembly render

Indianness as fungible within Buddhist and Hindu religious paradigms. Dance becomes a vital site to read how Singaporean-Indian subjects position themselves flexibly in relation to the cultural logics of global Indian classical dance, Singaporean and Indian nationalisms and emerging inter-Asia identifications.

Chapter Three: Anticipatory Traditionalism

In the self-styled “Renaissance City” of Singapore, traditional dancers of Indian and Malay styles find themselves marked as traditionalists and hence outside of the discourses salient to the region’s burgeoning field of contemporary arts. In this chapter I focus on how artists from traditional Indian and Malay dance lineages play with temporality through choreographic reassembly, slipping between past, present and future frames, in a move I call “anticipatory traditionalism”. This chapter features artists who work with formal and aesthetic features and historical narratives linked with their respective forms, pulled from various eras, to create a temporal tumble in which traditional pasts are repurposed to embody possible futures for culturally composite, twenty-first century Asian identities. I focus on one Indian and two Malay choreographers, at Chowk, Bhumi Collective and P7:1MA, who create work in a predictive mode, in anticipation of what will qualify either within traditional arts funding frameworks, or those of Asian contemporary dance. No longer invested in linking the ancient past to perpetuity, they instead intuit the near future of culture in Singapore. As suggested in the introduction to this dissertation, tradition has related and competing meanings in contemporary Asia – firstly, as forms of knowledge, practice and social relations and secondly as a genre of performing art. This chapter opens with three instances of traditional dance in contemporary Singapore unfolding along three distinct lines of thought.

Chapter Four: Generic Engineering

Choreographic reassembly in the twenty-first century deals with increased complexity. I introduce ‘generic engineering’ as a second order form of choreographic reassembly that produces new dance knowledges for the twenty-first century. I use the term engineering to highlight the problem-solving mindset often attributed to engineers that choreographers take on, as their work shifts from mediating aesthetic, philosophical and spiritual themes, to addressing problems of efficiency and efficacy associated with running a creative business. The result is greater pragmatism and reflexivity in traditional dance, as choreographers rethink their forms at the fundamental level of dance technique, as well as its ethical and political commitments. The chapter opens with two recent experiments in Singapore-made Indian dance Raka Maitra’s Pallavi Series (2015-2018) and January Low’s Reclaim (2019), I analyze these in relation to two distinct arts spaces that nurtured their creation, the first an arts space emerging organically as a ground-up transnational network of intercultural performance, and the other a top-down initiative by the Singapore National Arts Council to rapidly mimic and regulate the successes of the former. I then consider these works in relation to other prominent and successful experiments in Southeast Asian traditional dance, Choi Ka Fai’s *Soft Machine* (2015), Rianto’s *Medium* (2019) and Pichet Klunchun and Chen Wu-Kang’s *Behalf* (2019). Comparing and contrasting the shared features of these experiments – slow remediation of old-world dance forms by highly skilled choreographers with international collaborations who have a range of expertise in various performance, stage and sound media- as generic engineering—

new forms of choreographic reassembly that produces new dance knowledges for the twenty-first century.

Chapter 1: Surrogating Singaporean Multiracialism

In 1968, Bala Subramanion, Singapore's first Postmaster General, asked Krishna Pillai Bhaskar, a celebrated Singapore-based choreographer of Indian dance for a picture of an Indian dancer for use in the country's first definitive series of stamps. Issued three years after Singapore's independence from Malaysia in 1965 and titled "Masks and Dance Definitives" (Yap). The series depicted the traditional dance and drama forms of the Chinese, Indians and Malays (Fig 3). The stamp was issued as part of a drive to promote racial harmony. In an interview to the news website *asiaone.com* in 2015, Subramanion, then 98 years old explained that the stamps signaled a sense of urgency to incorporate the various ethnic groups of Singapore on a level stage: "Singapore experienced its most serious race riots in July and September of 1964, shortly after joining Malaysia. It is no wonder that racial harmony is a priority for Singapore." He had contacted Bhaskar's Arts Academy, as it was a "pioneer in Indian dance" (Lim). The subsequent image¹⁷ was featured in an iconic postal stamp released in 1968, featuring a young girl, dressed in the typical Bharatanatyam attire of the pre-stitched sari in turquoise blue and magenta, south Indian bridal jewelry decorating her forehead, neck, wrists and waist, rows of bells over her ankles, striking a pose typical of the dance form. The dancer in the image has her left hand stretched over the head, buckled slightly at the elbow mimicking the bough of a tree. The other arm, with right elbow raised at shoulder level, is bent at the chest so that her right wrist is at her breast, and body arching acutely from the waist to her left, as if leaning against a low wall. Her knees open outward and point away from each other, the legs forming a circle where the dancer's feet meet. The right toes meet the ground with the right heel raised, leaning against her left ankle, the foot of which is firmly planted on the ground. She sits in the characteristic *demi-plié* of South Indian temple dances.

In three short years following independence, dancing side-by-side became symbolic of the "side-by-side" living in inter-racial harmony under the rubric of Singaporean multiculturalism (Goh 236-242). But the Bharatanatyam dancer's presence, a figure representing the Indian nation since 1947, in the Singaporean national imaginary is a unique episode in the story of the globalization of Indian classical dance. This chapter peels off the layer of iconicity conferred upon the ornate figure of the Indian dancer to identify two unique attributes of Singaporean Bharatanatyam: first, via a study of the career trajectories of Indian dance pioneers – K.P. and Santha Bhaskar—Singaporean Bharatanatyam's continuity with Indian modern dance is established. Second, I consider the practice of Indian dance, with its laborious and spectacular dimensions, as a form imported from India and adopted by the Singaporean (and Malaysian) Indian diaspora to do particular kinds of cultural work, most crucially, to do the work of creating and reproducing an idealized Indian culture through what Joseph Roach calls "surrogation" – the three-sided relationship of memory, performance and substitution (2). I argue that in late colonial and early postcolonial Singapore, the presence of other Indian figures, the labor of dancing and the spectacle of its performance worked to minimize the spectacular yet unsettling presence of other laboring Indian figures in the pre-colonial Singaporean public domain.

In the 1950s, the decade prior to the stamp issue, Bharatanatyam dance practice registered an efflorescence in Singapore. Part of this chapter details the impetus and desire for viewing and practicing dance-as-Indian-tradition in late colonial Singapore. The Singapore

¹⁷ Image can be viewed as part of Lucille Yap's article published at <https://www.roots.gov.sg/stories-landing/stories/the-singapore-journey-50-years-through-stamps/story>. Also see works cited page.

Indian Fine Arts Society¹⁸ (SIFAS, est. 1949) first promoted stage productions by Indian artists before also becoming a performing arts school. Bhaskar's Arts Academy (est.1952¹⁹) first began Indian classical dance classes for Singapore's upper- and middle-class Indian communities. Today, training in the Indian classical dances or music is a widespread community activity among Singaporean Indians. Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music—the southern Indian musical form that accompanies the dance—are taught in several Indian performing arts training institutes across the island, of which SIFAS, Bhaskar's Arts Academy, Apsaras Arts and the Temple of Fine Arts are the largest²⁰. Both Bhaskar's Arts and SIFAS were established in the 1950s, while Apsaras Arts and The Temple of Fine Arts were established several decades later, in 1977 and 1981 respectively, flourishing alongside several other smaller dance schools and independent dance teachers. These institutions thrived largely on community support and student fees. In the late 1980s, when the Singapore Culture Ministry began to rethink the arts beyond its role as an ideological site and saw its potential as a sector for economic growth, larger institutions like the four listed above began receiving funding from the state.

Between the mid-1960s and 2012, SIFAS has produced around 5500 graduates of Indian classical dance. This number does not include those who did not take formal examinations (Rajan). Bhaskar's Arts Academy reports comparable numbers (S. Bhaskar, "Personal Interview"). The proliferation of institutes and teachers of Bharatanatyam dance resonate with the proliferation of images of traditionally attired Indian dancers on nation-wide racial harmony and tourism campaigns, on posters, radio and televised messages, state sponsored tele-serials or vinyl decals on public buses and inside the Mass Rapid Transport trains and stations. Until very recently, campaigns by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) featured Bharatanatyam dancers in full traditional attire, striking alluring poses alongside Chinese Lion-dance groups and Malay musical troupes. The thousands of stamps bearing the image of the Indian dancing girl, in the decades that followed, have seemingly come to life as thousands of dancing Singaporean Indian girls and women.

These innumerable instances demonstrate a dual function to the labor of Indian classical dance, particularly Bharatanatyam in Singapore. As an icon, the traditionally attired Indian classical dancer is implicated in racial harmony projects that is outward facing and part of an ethnically heterogeneous public culture. Simultaneously, the Tamil-speaking, Hindu segment of Singaporean Indians stage repeat-performances of a cohesive, civilizational ideal of Indianness that faces inward and is discernable within the boundaries of this community. Much space in this chapter is dedicated to Santha Bhaskar (1939-2022), whose career and position as a beloved public figure in Singapore attests to her success in performing this precarious double-act over a six-decade long career.

In the year 2015, Santha Bhaskar, then-seventy-six-years-old and the artistic director of Bhaskar's arts academy, received a call from the Singapore Philatelic Museum to reprise the image for an exhibition celebrating Singapore's 50th anniversary as a Republic. Surprisingly, it turned out that Bhaskar had in fact been the model upon which the stamp was based. The Philatelic Museum requested Bhaskar if she could pose for a photograph wearing a sari of the same colors, standing in the same position, in front of a life-size turquoise backdrop, which in turn is framed by the perforated borders that recall a stamp, with the words "10 CENTS" and

¹⁸ See SIFAS website <https://www.sifas.org/about-us.html>.

¹⁹ See Bhaskars Arts Academy website <https://www.bhaskarsartsacademy.com/about.cfm>

²⁰ The institutions also offer classes in vocal and instrumental training in south Indian Carnatic and northern Indian Hindustani Music, as well as Bharatanatyam, Odissi and Kathak dance forms.

“SINGAPORE” emblazoned on it²¹ (Lim). In juxtaposing this first image of the Indian dancing girl with the image of an aged Bhaskar, who was eighteen years old in 1968 when the photograph had been taken, the resulting image served as a joyful epilogue to the narrative of racial harmony that was propagated and promised at the birth of the nation. Between the late 1960s and 2015, the figure represented in the stamp has flourished, much like the cultural practice of Singaporean Bharatanatyam, from youth to maturity, identified, named and even celebrated as a genius artist, retired from her role as a nameless representative, to be replicated as an icon of Singaporean multiracialism. Santha Bhaskar surpassed her late husband in the reception of honors for exemplary service to nation, community and art, receiving the Singapore Cultural Medallion in 1990, the *Bintang Bakti Masyarakat* (Singapore Public Service Star) in 2016, and the *Pingat Jasa Gemilang* (Meritorious Service Medal) in 2021 (“Santha Bhaskar”). In the wake of her death²² in 2022, innumerable official statements, and condolence messages, including those offered by Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong²³ reiterated her artistic contributions to Singapore’s multiracial society. It is therefore in this role as an innovator of spectacular performances inflected with multiracial values, that Bhaskar is now immortalized in Singapore’s evolving cultural canon. Several generations of her students also posted moving tributes about their experiences with her as a teacher of Bharatanatyam dance and how her firm adherence to traditional technique offered them a doorway into Indian culture²⁴. Contradictory framings of Singapore’s most iconic Bharatanatyam dancer at national and communal levels points towards complicated histories and bodes interesting possibilities for the future of the dance form in Singapore.

Discussing racial politics in Singapore’s neighboring country of Malaysia, Aihwa Ong suggests: “In postcolonial upheavals, the multi-ethnic worlds created under colonialism were forcibly shaped into the policed politics of new nationalisms. ‘Ethnic’ categories were reconstituted and incorporated into minority modes of national belonging” (“The Enigma of Return”). Ong clarifies, however, that citizens also actively etch out new identities negotiating with, co-producing and capitalizing upon political and bureaucratic rationalities. Existing studies linking theatrical stages, the state and cultural citizenship in Singapore suggest that performance was deployed as social technology for governance and that artmaking was overdetermined by state cultural policy as an ideological ground to shape the moral imperatives of its citizens (Chong, 26). These studies therefore posit artists, primarily those from the world of the Singaporean artistic avant-garde as resisting hegemonic interventions of the state²⁵. I argue instead that Bharatanatyam dance practice is a site of both self-formation and an open public sphere in which community members reimagine themselves. In the following section, I offer historical perspectives on how the Bharatanatyam dancer emerges as a surrogate, substituting commonplace narratives of the “naturally contentious” Indians (Lee Kwan Yew qtd in Heng and

²¹ Image can be viewed as part of Lim, Yi Han’s article published. <https://www.asiaone.com/singapore/history-comes-alive-shes-indian-dancer-1968-postage-stamp>. Also see works cited page.

²² Santha Bhaskar passed away on February 26 2022.

²³ See reference for Lee Hsien Loong, for a long comment made on the Singapore’s Prime Minister’s Facebook page.

²⁴ Santha Bhaskar’s students solicited and collated photographs with Bhaskar from across the decades here: <https://padlet.com/soneiya96/qakike2zhz7l3a8h>

²⁵ See Langenbach and Ray (2010) and Terrence Chong (2012). I also offer brief details of this period between the late 1980s and 1990s about the rise of Singapore’s arts Avant-garde in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Devan, 204) in colonial and early postcolonial Malaya²⁶ (present day Singapore and Malaysia), while granting local Indians access and participation in new cultural movements emerging from early postcolonial India.

In this chapter, I will focus on the careers of Krishna Pillai (K.P.) and Santha Bhaskar, widely considered to be the “pioneers” of Indian dance in Singapore. Beginning with K.P. Bhaskar’s professional trajectory from India to Singapore, I highlight how Indian dance first came to Singapore as a modern form, through modern forms of technology - media and transportation - and then is adopted by diasporic Singaporeans as a form of Indian tradition and a public performance of a Hindu, Tamil identity. Other racially marked Indian figures stand as foils to the Bharatanatyam dancer, namely, the Indian plantation worker or derogatorily known as the *coolie* and the Indian convict, brought to precolonial Malaya by nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial labor circulation. They have received less space in Singaporean cultural memory; they are not hailed as representative figures either by the state or by members of the Indian community. I turned my attention to the Bharatanatyam dancer for the remainder of this chapter to consider the ways in which the laboring Indian female body becomes a figure in which cultural citizenship within the postcolonial, multiracial nation is negotiated.

Modern Histories of Traditional Indian Dance in Singapore

The oral histories of husband and wife dancers Krishna Pillai Bhaskar (1925-2013) and Santha Bhaskar (henceforth referred to as K.P. Bhaskar and S. Bhaskar respectively) detailing their experience in Singapore of the 1950s are full of itinerant adventures in colonial India and Malaya, their careers intersecting in significant ways with the emergence of modern and cinematic dance in India, while actively constituting the genre of traditional Indian dance in Singapore (“Oral History Interview”, K.P. Bhaskar; “Oral History interview” S.Bhaskar). The Bhaskars, alongside other teachers and students of Bharatanatyam in Singapore of the 1950s, sewed the dance form into gaps that emerged as Malayan society transitioned from colonial to postcolonial phases. These choreographers’ professional histories suggest that Bharatanatyam practice in Singapore and Malaysia evolved parallel to and distinct from that in India and consequently, produced different forms of dancing communities. While the training and practice of Bharatanatyam was initially almost entirely patronized by high-caste and wealthy practitioners, it would eventually become a conduit for the labor diaspora to gain access to the accumulated cultural capital of the form. Though the first wave of Indian dance teachers and performers who settled in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur were men (Thiagarajan, 70), it was their wives and their female students who retained and nurtured the form as a local tradition and grant the form its iconic power today. This gendered embodiment of a pleasurable, even erotically charged, imaginary of a grand, Indian civilization, offered the stigmatized Malayan-Indian diaspora a powerful icon of respectability within a multiracial milieu in which they occupied the

²⁶ The term Malaya has historically referred to British Malaya (1826-1957), the British colony of the Straits Settlements and the British protectorates of the Malay States in present day peninsular Malaysia in Southeast Asia. It also refers to the Malayan Union (1946-1948) post World War II, during which time Singapore was a Crown colony of Britain. Malaya also refers to The Federation of Malaya (1948-1963), following the Malayan Union’s independence from Great Britain. Singapore joined this latter political formation in 1963, after it became part of Malaysia. In 1965, Singapore was expelled from Malaysia to become an independent country. In this dissertation, I use the term Malaya refers to both the period of colonial British Malaya as well as the era following World War II, when circulation of people between present day Singapore and Malaysia was largely seamless.

lowest social tier. This also offered this community access to cultural citizenship in an emerging Indian national identity, which then allowed for incorporation within an emerging multi-racial Singaporean national identity. *Shakuntala: A dance drama* (1954), Singapore's first home-grown ensemble production of Indian dance described in the following section vividly demonstrates both the gendered aspect of Bharatanatyam performance in the Singaporean Indian diaspora, and the self-conscious incorporation of the local Indian community into pan-Indian civilizational narratives emerging in the early postcolonial era.

In 1954, the first batch of students learned with K.P. Bhaskar staged *Shakuntala*, a classical Sanskrit work penned by playwright Kalidasa in the sixth century C.E. The program booklet for *Shakuntala: A dance drama* ("Performing Arts") proudly proclaims that unlike the many prior Indian dance performances, this production would, for the first time, feature local talent from among the "Indians and Ceylonese who form [*sic*] a significant part of the population". Most of these talents, it is evident from the many photographs within the program, were girls or adolescent women (*ibid*).

Barring the musicians forming "Bhaskar's Malayan Orchestra", and K.P. Bhaskar who played two, central male characters in the production, *Shakuntala* was largely enacted by amateur performers. Names of performers listed in the program offer some insight into their socio-economic position - with surnames such as Vishwanath, Vishwanathan, Sinnadurai, Thambi, Pillai which suggest upper caste Tamil or Malayalee ancestry or Singham, Gunarathnam which suggest upper-class Sinhalese (Sri Lankan) descent. The list also indicates the presence of a few, evidently Christian and Muslim performers, including dancers Farida Shukur and Isabella Michael, and the musician Faiz Mohamed on the Northern Indian stringed instrument called the *sarangi*, listed in the program as the *sarangy* ("Shakuntala – A dance drama"). Significantly, none of the performers carry the patronymic appellation "daughter of" or "son of" (an Anglicization of the Malay term *anak*) that fit within naming and identification conventions established in the colonial era that marks the Malayan-Indian labor diaspora²⁷. From the late-colonial period onwards, elite Indians either took up caste or professional-status terms as surnames or simply used their father's first names as surnames, as was commonly practiced in large parts of South India, without the "daughter-of" or "son-of" attachment. The conspicuous absence of these names in the program notes of the *Shakuntala* dance drama suggests that training in what was then a new and exciting form of dance from India was still a luxury few in colonial Singapore could afford.

The rhetorical tone of the program also betrays anxieties around the status of dance in the Indian community. The program booklet dedicates an entire page discussing the specifics of the dance styles featured in the production. These include Bharatanatyam, *Kathak*, *Manipuri* and *Kathakali*- all styles of dance then recently inducted into the Indian neo-classical canon. The notes instruct the reader to view Indian dances as "a form of religion", a practice of "grave dignity and austerity" and acknowledges the contribution of ballet and modern dance stars, the Russian Anna Pavlova and the American La Meri, in recognizing "the importance of Indian dancing as a rival to the art world [*sic*] as much as Ballet to the West" and inspiring its revival ("Shakuntala – A dance drama, 3). The staging of *Shakuntala* therefore inaugurates the self-conscious performance of Indian identity in Singapore, exhibiting civilizational parity with the west. Staged at the Victoria Theatre²⁸, itself a colonial-era construction built by Indian convicts

²⁷ Patrick Pillai suggests that the patronymic *anak* was a "give-away sign that [the name holder is] of Indian origin" and a common way of identifying Indians in Malaysia. The same is true in Singapore (25-26).

²⁸ As per British spelling conventions used in Singapore.

in 1862, *Shakuntala* marked the entrance of the Indian community into upper-class Singaporean cultural life, as possibly the earliest performance by local Indians to be staged there.

The story of *Shakuntala* first appears as an episode in the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, and plays upon themes of memory, forgetting and recognition that precede the birth of a new nation. In Kalidasa's play, Shakuntala, born of a *rishi* or divine seer and an *apsara* or heavenly nymph, is abandoned by her parents and is raised in the forest by the kindly hermit Kanva. King Dushyanta while on a hunting trip in the woods, encounters Shakuntala and the two elope. He leaves soon after giving her a ring as a token of marriage, making a promise to return and claim her as his rightful queen. However, Shakuntala is soon cursed by a sage and under its effects Shakuntala disappears from Dushyanta's memory, and the ring he gave her is lost to the flowing waters of a river. Shakuntala, carrying Dushyanta's child and desolate after months of waiting, makes her way to his capital, and demands that she is received by Dushyanta's court, claiming to be his wife. As Dushyanta does not remember, Shakuntala flees to her mother, the *apsara* Menaka who resides in *devaloka* (paradise). A significant amount of time passes, and a fisherman arrives at Dushyanta's court and slices the belly of the fish open, only to reveal the ring that Dushyanta had given to Shakuntala as a token of their bond. The sight of the ring instantly restores the king's memory, who retrieves his queen and their son, Bharata, from *devaloka*. Thus, through a token carried across the waters, Shakuntala's divine origins are confirmed and the couple, separated by forgetfulness and distance, are reunited. Bharata's ambiguous lineage is also resolved as being both divine and royal, and thus begins the lineage of the *Kurus*, the family around whom the grand epic *Mahabharata* is based. Bhārata is the root of the term *Bhārat* and is one among other pre-colonial names for the Indian subcontinent. *Shakuntala* therefore rehearses an origin story for authentic Indian identity and the incorporation of ethnically heterogeneous peoples into a single cultural lineage. Costuming children of the Singaporean Indian and Ceylonese elite as participants in an episode that preceded the birth of a nation, the production rehearses an emergent diasporic Indian identity for both the community itself and others in Singapore.

As evident from the details in the program booklet, *Shakuntala* did not aim to be a traditional Bharatanatyam *mārgam* – a specific order of repertoire items that come together in the traditional style – but is an assortment of various Indian dance styles. Though K.P. Bhaskar and the school named after him became famous as a Bharatanatyam dance school, his professional trajectory prior to his arrival in Singapore was firmly grounded in the then-nascent field of Indian modern dance, as we shall see below. In the following section, I detail a short history of the Bhaskar's arrival in Singapore, their recognition of local demand for tradition through dance, regardless of being grounded in Indian modernist movements themselves. This section therefore lays the groundwork to Singaporean Indian dance's embrace of neo-classicism, before moving on to describe the naturalization of this neo-classicism as tradition.

K.P. Bhaskar (b. 1925) had a storied youth; as a young man from an aristocratic Malayalee family, his anomalous pursuit of a career in dance led him from his native village in the Indian state of Kerala to the capital city of the Travancore Presidency (present day Thiruvananthapuram) in 1940. Here he was recruited by Perumanoor Gopinathan Pillai. Guru Gopinath, as he was popularly known, was himself quite famous as a dance innovator, having staged several solo and group shows and notably, sensational performances all over India with the American Orientalist dancer Ragini Devi (Esther Luella Sherman), all over India. Under Gopinath, K.P. Bhaskar trained and performed a modernist reinvention of the *Kathakali* dance-theatre form called *Keralanatanam*, under the royal patronage of Chitra Thirunal Balaraman

Varma, the last ruling Maharaja of the Princely State of Travancore (now, part of Kerala). Bhaskar also deepened his childhood studies under various hereditary masters of *Kathakali*. This engagement with traditional and modern forms of dance made him a good fit in the fledgling Tamil film industry emerging in the city of Madras (present day Chennai). Madras in the 1940s was the center of a cultural nationalist project of reinventing the temple dance form known as *sadir*, as a classical form known as Bharatanatyam²⁹. However, as Prarthana Purkayastha notes, there was “not one single homogenous project of re-inventing classicism” and “diverse forms of cultural nationalism were at play in different regions of India” (59). Rather than engage with artistic circles around the Madras Music Academy, the epicenter of Bharatanatyam’s revival, K.P. Bhaskar trained and performed with Uday Shankar, the father of Indian modern dance, who was then in Madras filming his magnum opus, *Kalpana*, a dance film still famous as a pioneering work of Indian film and screen dance. Bhaskar was cast in *Kalpana*, thus encountering another genre of Indian modernist aesthetics propelled by art movements in Bengal (Mitter, 1995). Uday Shankar popularized the “creative dance” style, which originates at *Shantiniketan*, the school founded by Indian Nobel Laureate and polymath Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) in present-day West Bengal, India. Incorporating elements from various traditional styles into stage dances was described as *rashayonik shangmishron*, Bengali for “chemical synthesis” (Purkayastha 143).

K.P. Bhaskar therefore participated in and contributed to newly unfolding networks of modernism in early twentieth century Indian dance. Both Guru Gopinath’s *Keralanatanam* and Uday Shankar’s creative dance, though distinct, followed the impulse to expand traditional performing art forms of India into a modern idiom that would translate cross-culturally to audiences across India and the world. Creative dance practitioners had conceptualized a different vision of cultural nationalism—rather than establish parity with the West by linking dance to ancient Indian civilization as did Indian classical revivalists, Indian modernists did so by participating in and contributing to global trajectories of modernism in art. Following his work in Madras, Bhaskar worked as a choreographer and performer in Calcutta for a time, after which Bhaskar found opportunities as “dance-master”—lead choreographer and dance teacher—to traveling performing arts companies in Colombo and Kandy in Sri Lanka, returning to Kolkata and later to Bangalore in south India. In these urban centers, Bhaskar worked on variety shows, both in make-shift open air stages, as well as in clubs. These shows featured not only Indian folk and modern dances that Bhaskar choreographed and performed in, but also included, Bhaskar reports, other performers who did ballroom dance, Hungarian and Russian folk dances, and in colonial Ceylon, Kandyan dance as well. Bhaskar remembers enthusiastic audiences who would fill up make-shift venues, though the racial, caste and class composition of these audiences are not obvious to me from his accounts (“Oral History Interview with Daniel Chew”, Reel 2).

Enroute to Australia in 1952, the steam ship that carried Bhaskar and his associates was forced to stop in Singapore. Here, Bhaskar found a community of Indians eager to watch and learn Bharatanatyam, which was at the time, a relatively new form³⁰ (“Oral History Interview

²⁹ This project was primarily led by individuals at the Madras Music Academy, and later the Kalakshetra Institute. See reference for Meduri “Bharatanatyam as a global dance”.

³⁰ The term “Bharatanatyam” gained credence as a reformed and revived style of *sadir*, when upper-caste performers, belonging primarily to the Tamil Brahmin community in Madras, began learning and performing the form in the public sphere in the late colonial era of the 1940s (Raghavan qtd in Meduri (“Transfiguration of the Indian/Asian” 231). South Indian temple and court dance traditions, known as *sadir* and *cinnamelam*, featured a gendered reproduction of dance and musical knowledge, as female dancers ritually dedicated to particular temples performed the form in public, while male members of the lineage specialized in music composition, choreography and teaching (Coorlawala, 54).

with Daniel Chew”). Bhaskar’s active presence and circulation through routes of modern dance in the Indian subcontinent would ironically lead him across the Bay of Bengal, to become a teacher of the newly anointed “classical” dance form, Bharatanatyam. Audiences and a ready student base in Singapore at the time saw Bharatanatyam as ideal and representative of contemporary Indian high culture. This was because the dancing girl had already entered the Malayan-Indian imagination through the medium of cinema and, to a lesser extent, through sporadic live performances by circulating dancers as explored below.

Bharatanatyam’s popularity in British Malaya was co-constituted by the emergence of two modern phenomena, and not, contrary to popular understandings, because the dance form was always integrated into traditional Indian lifestyles. The popularity and circulation of Indian cinema in the 1940s, which strongly featured dance, primed audiences to seek out live performances of the same and generated popular interest in learning and performing cinema-inspired dancing. Dance scholar Hari Krishnan has put forward the theory of “celluloid classicism”, identifying that the desire to learn and practice Bharatanatyam, with its neo-Indian-classical overtones, was aided strongly by the parallel development of Tamil cinema from the late 1940s onward. Many early performers in the Indian film industry belonged to lineages of hereditary performance. They had turned to working in cinema after the criminalization of professional dancing in 1947. In an unpublished conference paper presented in 2014, Hari Krishnan also discusses that the first generation of Bharatanatyam dancers and teachers in Singapore loved Tamil cinematic dances featuring dancer-turned-film actors such as Vyjayanthimala Bali, Padmini and Ragini among others, all of whom were trained in Bharatanatyam or other forms of temple and court style dances. Besides the seduction of Tamil cinema, K.P. Bhaskar’s initial engagement with the Singaporean Indian community also coincides with a culture of film-to-stage dancing popular in Singapore at the time. Chua Soo Pong, who founded the Singapore Chinese Opera, reports that between the 1950s and 1960s stage choreographies organized by amateur and student dancing societies often meticulously replicated dances featuring Chinese, Malay and Indian cinema. Indian cinema garnered appeal across various ethnic groups, particularly for its spectacular dances. To quote Chua:

“...all the Malay (films) that were made in Singapore, they have Malay dance in the movies and the interesting thing was that the Malay films made in Singapore they were mainly directed by Indian film directors (...) So they would re-choreograph the dance to suit the movie. So, if you look at these old Malay dance films, it is very eclectic in a way that they are not really Malay-Malays. They are being acculturated...”

Shortly after, Chua says, “the Chinese would go to see (Hindi movies) because they would enjoy the dance. Even my mother did that.” (Chua qtd in “Oral History interview with Sian Eira Jay (Dr)”).

Later, in 1962, a twenty-two-year-old Santha Bhaskar would feature in a scene in the Malay film *Badang*, playing the role of an Indian dancer performing for a fictitious 14th century Malay Sultan’s court. This scene echoes another one from real life, in which a much younger Santha Bhaskar performed at royal functions associated with the birthday of the Sultan of Johor, in the mid-1950s (S. Bhaskar, “Keynote Address”). Practices of live and cinematic dancing were thus intertwined in colonial Malaya and early postcolonial Singapore at the time of K.P. Bhaskar’s arrival.

The second modern phenomenon that consolidated dance audiences across colonial India and Malaya was the relatively newfound mobility of performing artists. Once restricted to their native villages and neighboring towns, performing artists could now circulate along transportation networks laid by the colonial British administration to feed the Empire's voracious appetite to extract and circulate Indian raw materials and labor. Taking advantage of these new modes of circulation, dance and musical troupes took their trade to the far reaches of the British empire. Premalatha Thiagarajan cites dance and music historians Daves Soneji and Katherine Schofield who report the presence of courtesan dance and South Indian folk dance in early 20th century Malaya. Jim Sykes also reports traveling dancers performing different styles of Indian dances in Kuala Lumpur, and a famous Indian Kathak dancer, Menaka and her troupe performing in Malaya in 1935 (Thiagarajan 70).

These intertwined histories of dancing, film and itinerant Indian performing artists suggests that dance-viewing publics were both primed and constituted by circulating films featuring dancers, networks of traveling performers and impresarios. Many styles of live dance, including cinematic, folk and quasi-neo-classical styles were popular among these audiences. K.P. and Santha Bhaskar would go on to contribute to this phenomenon in rural Malaya and Singapore beginning in 1955, travelling and presenting a dynamic and mixed repertoire of folk, semi-classical, cinematic and freshly constructed experimental dances. The colonial era Malayan-Indian community of student dancers, however, clearly articulated a preference for the neo-classical vision offered by the Bharatanatyam revivalists. Santha Bhaskar, who arrived in Singapore in 1955 as K.P. Bhaskar's fifteen-year-old bride, was trained in the Guru Gopinath style of *Keralanatanam* dance. However, K.P. Bhaskar arranged for his young wife to live and learn Bharatanatyam technique through annual, month-long residences with Kutralam Ganesam Pillai and Kittapa Pillai, both *nattuvanars* (male teachers) from the *devadasi* lineage³¹. K.P. Bhaskar appreciated the zeitgeist around Bharatanatyam in colonial Malaya, a form that S. Bhaskar insists she had never come across or even heard of despite growing up in an artistically inclined South Indian family ("Oral History Interview with Nur Azlin bte Salem"). Bharatanatyam therefore came to the Bhaskars as did *Keralanatanam* or Uday Shankar's style of modern dance- as one among the many dance forms reassembled from older traditional styles in late colonial India.

This history is congruent with narratives of upper caste practitioners who came into the fold of the performing arts milieu in late colonial and early postcolonial India, etching out international careers in the vacuum left by the criminalization of *devadasis* and *nautchwalis*. Despite being new entrants in the field of the performing arts, the Bhaskars' expertise in various styles of popular and traditional forms made them credible in the role of *gurus* for the first generation of students, who valued access to traditional knowledge embedded in the classical Indian performing art forms. Through the 1950s, K.P. Bhaskar taught and choreographed for the

³¹ Both *nattuvanars* were wooed by the Indian elite and middle classes (and castes) to impart their hereditary knowledge after temple dance and *nautch* was outlawed in 1947. As the Indian nation-state came into being in 1947, new institutional spaces legitimating the Bharatanatyam as "the national dance par excellence" were opened up through the collaborative efforts between high-status cultural figures - dancer and Theosophist Rukmini Arundale, scholars Kapila Vatsyayan and V. Raghavan among them- and the Government of India ("Labels, Histories..." Meduri 230). At the Kalakshetra Institute in Madras (present-day Chennai), Arundale standardized a Bharatanatyam dance training curriculum and established conventions of performance, costume and played a role in "visualizing nationality" (Coorlawala 59), re-scripted as ancient and grounded in deep spirituality. [1] Well-trained Bharatanatyam practitioners from elite backgrounds came to embody a notion of Indian tradition and culture that is now recognized globally.

daughters of high-status Indians and Sri Lankans in Singapore and Malaysia, many of whom worked for the colonial and later, for the postcolonial civil services. Simultaneously, they also cultivated audiences and taught students in the plantation-estate communities of rural Malaya, with caste and class profiles distinct from those in the cosmopolitan centers of Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Santha and K.P. Bhaskar forayed into the *kampongs* - village settlements scattered around the island of Singapore, as well as small towns linked to colonial plantations in Kluang, Muar and Batu Pahat in the state of Johor, as well as those in the Perak, Malacca, and Penang provinces (Bhaskar, “Keynote Address”). In these travels they brought to life the circulating image of the Indian dancing woman, associated with spirituality yet charged with the erotic affiliations of the celluloid medium, in the heartlands of south-west Malaya. Garnering large audiences belonging to various races and socio-economic strata, the Bhaskars gained sufficient recognition and popularity to establish small schools of dance in Singapore and Johor.

While histories of circulation of dance form through itinerant artists and through film explain the popularity of Bharatnatyam, what can explain the import and reinvention of Bharatanatyam as Indian tradition in Singapore? Moreover, why does the female Bharatanatyam dancer become the figure appropriate to articulating cultural and civilizational distinction within Singapore’s postcolonial, multiracial milieu? Answers to these questions articulate how Singapore’s Bharatanatyam culture is linked to historic, politically mediated cultural shifts around dance in India but diverge in specific and important ways. The period of about four years, between the mid- to late-1950s is important in understanding the Bhaskars’ shift from performers of ‘creative’ and modern styles of Indian dance, to becoming teachers of Bharatnatyam and later, to become masters of ‘traditional’ Indian dance, responding to demands from their Singaporean and Malaysian student base. Following this period, the practice of recruiting teachers trained at the Kalakshetra institute and other Indian institutions became commonplace in Singapore.

Performing Multi-racialism: A Doomed Romance?

Santha Bhaskar’s first choreography “Butterfly Lovers” (1958) was not a typical Bharatanatyam production. The narrative of the dance drama was inspired by a popular Chinese film *Liang Shan Bo Zhu Ying Tai* (1954), a tragic story of doomed lovers based on a much older legend set in medieval China. Bhaskar blended Bharatanatyam with an assortment of identifiably Chinese dance techniques for *Butterfly Lovers*, having learnt them through her engagement with Chinese dancers in Singapore at the time. Bhaskar included segments featuring the Chinese sword dance, fan dance and scarf dance, and one other style she identifies as being done with “water sleeves”—a costume element in Chinese Opera with long sleeves that extend below the fingers to create fluid, ribbon-like movements in the air (Bhaskar, “Oral History Interview with Nur Azlin bte Salem”). Bhaskar was eighteen years old at the time of this choreography and reports having created simple costumes with fabric from Singapore’s Chinatown, put together in an air of fearless fun, much like the choreography itself. The result, Bhaskar says, fascinated non-Indian, particularly Chinese audiences, as daily shows at the Victoria Theatre sold-out for two whole weeks. “They (Chinese audiences) would come and watch the show the first day, and again come for the second day too...It was like, we didn’t have any problem for the audience and then you know [*sic*]. But the Indians didn’t accept it” (*ibid*).

Indian audiences were apparently perturbed by this multicultural experiment. Parents of some students complained that the whole production was a waste of labor and time which might have been repurposed to stage Hindu mythology and “couldn’t understand why we did it” (*ibid*).

They did it for fun, because as dance-innovators, the Bhaskars were good at constructing cosmopolitan, cross-generic performances that had great popular appeal.

“Butterfly Lovers” was S. Bhaskar’s first experiment in choreographic reassembly, in which Chinese dance and Bharatanatyam techniques were spliced and integrated into the choreography to create a reassembled hybrid. Atypical of other international figures of the Indian performing arts that emerged in this era, the Bhaskars actively rejected claims to pure, authentic dance lineages, even as they foregrounded their expertise in various Indian dance forms. K.P. Bhaskar’s experience as a traditionally trained, transnational performer working in itinerant vaudevillian troupes as well as in the film industry, granted the Bhaskars a specific kind of expertise that was apposite to the Singapore situation-- that of reassembling a variety of forms to engage and entertain audiences across cultures. This expertise has rendered several choreographies by Santha Bhaskar as emblematic of Singaporean culture in various international settings. Another exemplary instance of Bhaskar’s cross-generic experimentation includes *Manohra*, which premiered in 1996, following the choreographer S. Bhaskar’s residency at the Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand, as part of an ASEAN³² exchange program. *Manohra* is performed extensively in Thailand in classical and court styles, as well as a ballet composed in the early 20th century by the Thai King Rama XI. Bhaskar reports having meditated upon her experiences and choreographed this work, melding a mix Thai classical and Bharatanatyam dance technique (Bhaskar, “Keynote Address”). An episode of the Buddhist *Jataka Tales*, which recounts the past lives of the Buddha, the story follows the titular character, *Manohra*, a *kinnari*, a mythical creature that is part-bird and part-woman, who is ensnared by a hunter, but in time finds her rightful place as a queen. This choice of setting a well-loved Thai story to choreograph a Bharatanatyam-Thai dance hybrid signals a gesture of Singaporean choreographic diplomacy, linked with Santha Bhaskar’s participation in the ASEAN exchange program.

Bhaskar’s own narrative is that her style of choreography was attuned to the demands of the situation as an Indian choreographer in Singapore. Discussing a recent choreography, she had developed to be presented in Jogjakarta (Indonesia) alongside representatives of the nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for the ASEAN Festival of Arts, Santha Bhaskar states:

“I have to choreograph two dances... I did, it’s already choreographed, I included Malay steps, Chinese dance steps and Bharatanatyam steps. I have taken Pallavi (resident teacher and choreographer of Kathak at Bhaskar’s Arts Academy) with me. So I have to do four (styles) - Kathak, Chinese Dance, Malay dance and Bharatanatyam into seven minutes of dance...I cannot just do a *varnam*. They will say, oh I can see this in India now why do you want to bring it there?”

(S. Bhaskar, “Personal Interview” 2018).

Between contrary demands for “innovation” and expectations of “authentic Singaporean” fare on the international stage, Bhaskar-as-choreographer is called upon to render a signature style of Bharatanatyam that represents Singaporean multiracialism and not just its constituent Indian identity. The local Indian community however engages in Bharatanatyam practice as a form of learning and propagating authentic forms of Indian tradition-as-dance without obvious

³² ASEAN stands for Association of Southeast Asian Nations, an inter-governmental political and economic cooperation union. The ASEAN has ten member-states: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, The Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

miscegenation with other, non-Indian varieties of dance. Bhaskar's work of transforming Bharatanatyam into a dance of Singaporean multiracialism, therefore, meets with contention, even outright denial from within the local Indian community.

Singapore based Bharatanatyam dancer and dramaturg, Nidya Santhini Manokara, suggests that Singaporean Bharatanatyam has largely remained a cultural "backwater, with little contemporary inflection" (44). Manokara was trained at the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (SIFAS), which, like other major Indian performing arts institutes in Singapore are staffed almost entirely with teachers from India and often graduates of the Kalakshetra Institute³³ (Manokara (23), S. Bhaskar ("Keynote Address)). These institutions respond to demand from students of Bharatanatyam in Singapore, who value receiving the stamp of legitimacy afforded by teachers who are graduates of premier institutions in India. Even among practitioners, the general view is that authenticity and adherence to the classical expression of Bharatanatyam carries a near-religious significance. Responding to this prevailing sentiment, the National Arts Councils' funding criteria mark "traditional" and "contemporary" dance as generic rather than temporal markers— "tradition" implying orthodoxy and continuity with how the dance form is practiced in India, and "contemporary" inflections marking any formal, technical or aesthetic deviations from that tradition. The hybrid dancing figure emerging from Bhaskar's experiments in choreographic reassembly threatens to substitute the Bharatanatyam dancer as a beloved icon of reinvented Indian tradition. Much like the half-bird, half-woman *Kinnari* of hybrid lineage, or like *Shakunthala*, whose purity is called to question, reassembled Indian dance has remained a source of anxiety as a threat to notions of authentic tradition among the Indian dance community in Singapore. What work does the stamp of tradition, with its specific, spectacular performance of idealized Indian ethnicity, gender, and lineage, do for Singapore's Indian community?

The *Nartaki* as a Sacrificial Double

It is significant that in colloquial speech, and in arts funding categories, Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi and other forms of dance that were revived as forms of 'classical' dance in India are considered Indian 'traditional' dance in Singapore. Though imported and reinvented, those dance practices marked as 'tradition' are now effectively, 'little traditions', as described by Anthony Giddens, a site where stable, intergenerational communities of practice have generated their own normative prescriptions, conventions and "formulaic truths" upon sub-national, ethnic identities that have taken on qualities of the "traditional", as practices that have shaped Singaporean subjectivity for decades. As Giddens describes individuals in post-traditional orders of society reflexively deploy the logic of tradition such that they activate and contextualize elements of the past to fashion stable and perpetuating identities for the future (63-65). The elements selected themselves warrant a deeper, critical reexamination. In their discussion of how

³³ The Kalakshetra Institute is at heart of Bharatanatyam's mid-twentieth century revival, and the fulcrum upon which the standard format of Bharatanatyam, is hinged. Due to its status as a national institution, which adopted western forms of conservatory style pedagogy including the standardization of a syllabus for training and diploma programs, as well as teaching certificates, enabling its graduates to propagate a standard form of Bharatanatyam across the world and since the late 1960s. In other words, despite the popularity of other dance teachers - notably the students of T. Balasaraswati, a direct descendent of the *devadasi* tradition— the Kalakshetra and an affiliated constellation of universities and institutions in India set the agenda for the globalization of Bharatanatyam through standardization processes and the norms of performance of this dance form *globally*. Singapore has not been an exception to this trend of global Bharatanatyam.

traditions come to be invented within nationalist struggles, Hobsbawm and Ranger identify that these inventions emerge as the community chooses to actively discard existing communal practices in favor of substitutes (8). Linking this to Joseph Roach's discussion on performance as surrogation, which he describes as "the doomed search for originals by continuously auditioning stand-ins" (3), I suggest that the Indian traditional dancer—known in Tamil and Sanskrit as the *narthaki*—becomes an "auspicious" substitute for other "atrocious figures" that stood-in for diasporic Indians in colonial Malaya, who have largely faded from national cultural memory. The laborious, intergenerational practice of learning, teaching and performing traditional dance, similarly, takes the place of other public performances of Singaporean Tamil identity and Hindu devotion, marked as uncivilized or discordant and thus greatly minimized in popularity by the mid-twentieth century.

Elizabeth Fuller Collins identifies that *Amman* (mother goddess) and *Murugan* temples, and smaller makeshift shrines dedicated to Tamil village deities have populated the Malayan and Singaporean landscapes since the late 1800s (3). The following spectacular practices were once central to Tamil Hindu community in colonial Malaya: animal and blood sacrifices in Hindu temples, worship of low-caste deities of non-Vedic origin. These, having no traceable textual basis were considered corruptions to authentic Hinduism ("Religion State" Sinha 212). Related to social-reform and caste-upliftment movements in India, both colonial authorities and Indian political groups were involved in the minimization of these practices. While colonial authorities saw these communal and performative practices of devotion as a threat to colonial authority, the move to ban practices associated with *Taipuṣam*, an annual festival for the deity Murugan, along with other, apparently backward forms of devotion were promoted by reform-minded, middle-class members from within the Tamil community in Singapore.

While loud drumming and the thronging crowds drawn by *Taipuṣam* activities were not favored by the colonial government in the Straits Settlements³⁴, they still considered it a legitimate form of Hindu worship and maintained a strict policy of non-interference (*ibid*). Sinha identifies that in the 1930s, *Taipuṣam* was under threat of being banned, as an emergent middle-class segment of Tamils eagerly sought to disassociate with circulating, negative discourses around Indians by the early 1920s. This segment of the Tamil diaspora in Malaya spearheaded the "Self-Respect Movement" that reimagined a secular Tamil identity that was largely subscribed to notions of rationality, individual agency and willingness to evaluate the moral dimensions of local ritual practices. These agents conversed with mass movements afoot in Tamil Nadu, connected to the Dravidian movement, an anti-Brahmin Tamil regionalist movement imbricated in South Indian caste politics. Consequently, the *Ahampadiyar Sangam* (Untouchables Association), was established in 1929, later registered as the Tamil Reform Association (TRA) in 1932. One of the primary concerns of this association was the reform and revival of Tamil cultural practice by launching a "crusade against all superstitions that disgrace Tamil society" (Sinha, "Religion-State", 212). *Taipuṣam*'s spectacular and theatrical aspects, namely the carrying of the *alaku/ alagu kāvadi*- a spiked wooden frame carried borne on the shoulder, often skewered to the body as a ritual of devotion performed were, Sinha notes, "labelled as 'self-torture' and acts of 'self-mortification', the colonial tone being obvious in these pre-existing descriptions long-used in in the Indian context and readily inserted into Malayan debates" (*ibid*).

Indian classical dancing-as-tradition on the other hand offered a pleasant contrast as a public performance of Indian civilization. Despite the Self-Respect Movement's roots in anti-

³⁴ The Straits Settlements refer to Singapore, Penang and Malacca (the latter two in present-day Malaysia).

Brahmin caste politics in Tamil Nadu, the TRA's efforts had the peculiar effect of promoting Bharatanatyam as a refined and acceptable form of performative devotion, regardless of this form's birth in the criminalization of lower-caste ways of life, and its subsequent revival by predominantly upper-caste, Brahmin practitioners. This choice of Bharatanatyam dance as a substituted form of tradition offers possibilities to consider the different aesthetic registers elicited by spectacular, public performances of devotion. Bharatanatyam dance and the *narthaki* as a figure, replaced practices that provoked shock and figures that incited perverse fascination among non-Indians. Public imaginaries of Indians circulating in the multi-ethnic context of colonial Singapore were populated with 'atrocious figures', victims without agency, punished by a blind-faith religion, arising in the multicultural milieu. The *narthaki* instead inspired connotations of the ever-auspicious—*nityasumangali* (Kersenboom) with a long history of being associated with bringing good fortune, prosperity and already an object of cross-cultural desire through the filmic medium.

Here I list some prevalent 'atrocious' figures. Besides the spiked and skewered Murugan worshiper, Indian convicts were commonplace in Singapore in the early to mid-nineteenth century. As a penal colony between 1833 and 1867, Indian convicts were regularly shipped to Singapore. Officially criminalized under colonial law, a fraction of them were considered dangerous and high-risk; the vast majority were managed leniently by prison administrators and had free movement around the settlement. Depending on the nature of their crimes, these convicts were grouped into classes, ranging from first-class convicts considered the most "trustworthy" and granted permission to move freely and work in various capacities, and the fifth class of convicts who labored in iron chains (Tan).

Those in between were employed in various capacities around the city, including hospitals and construction projects. Indian convicts in effect laid the foundations of Singapore's urban infrastructure. Many of Singapore's beautiful, now-iconic colonial era buildings were built by them, including St. Andrew's Cathedral, the *Istana* or the palace of the Singapore President, the Victoria Town Hall, which later became the racially exclusive Victoria Theatre reserved for performances by British and European artists. When Singapore became a Crown Colony in 1867, it effectively ceased to become a penal colony and first-class convicts were permitted to stay, eventually building families, businesses and naturalizing into the local ethnoscape. Regardless, convict histories produced their own fearsome images of Indian men as potentially dangerous and violent.

Imaginaries of Malayan Indian women circulated in equally problematic ways. Narratives of violent Indian men were paired with sexually deviant Indian women, inciting domestic violence due to adulterous dalliances (Datta 587). Nevertheless, they were also portrayed in colonial archival documents, including newspapers, planters' narratives, court records and government departmental records as passive victims. Historian Anurima Datta establishes that the unequal male-female ratio in Malayan plantations embroiled women in domestic disputes centered on adultery and power play between men. As women were scarce, jealousy and triangular love affairs abounded, often resulting in violent and horrific deaths of women in the hands of their husbands or lovers. Colonial authorities eschewed any responsibility for these problems that in fact were rooted in poor labor management and the miserable conditions of indentured labor. Instead, they directed attention to the perceived "constitutional jealousy of Orientals" and widespread practices of honor killings in India. Datta suggests that colonial discourse constructed the labor plantation as an essentially immoral space, combining Victorian

notions of monogamous marriage and adultery with the Hindu worldview that constructed female sexuality as potentially dangerous and threatening (590).

Worship of Hindu goddesses in colonial Malaya likely exacerbated this view. Firewalking (*Timiti* or *Theemithi*) and animal sacrifices were dedicated to *Māriamman* and *Kaliyamman*. The appellation *amman* translates as mother; *Māri* alludes to the powerful, ravaging effect of smallpox, making *mariamman* the patron goddess of the sick and ailing. *Kaliyamman* refers to the goddess whose skin is black, whose aspect is dark, chaotic and thirsty for the blood of demons and enemies. Gauri Krishnan describes *Theemithi* as a “ritual street theater festival”, involving hundreds of thousands of devotees committing to the vow of walking over hot embers, in memory of the vow taken by *Draupadi*, the female protagonist of the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, deified as *Draupadiamman*³⁵. Spread over the course of several months, *Theemithi* rituals are not limited to fire walking, but other embodied expressions of dedication to the goddess, including *kumbidu thandam* and *adi pradakshinam*, involving different combinations of circumambulations and full-body prostrations on the street for specific lengths of time (“Expressions of faith” 141). *Theemithi* like *Thaipusam* are less common and less prominent as practices of devotion in India, whereas are known to be spectacular signifiers of Hindu religious practice in sites of the Indian labor diaspora, such as Singapore, Malaysia, Fiji, Mauritius and the Reunion Islands (*ibid*). The *Narthaki* offers sharp contrast to the public performance of devotion through *Theemithi*; in Bharatanatyam precise and familiar enactments of goddess stories show them as bedecked in the same splendid, silk and gemstone accoutrements that also adorn the *Narthaki*’s body. Though embodied and physically demanding, the labor and pain of learning dance is stretched over the course of decades and artfully hidden on stage, presenting a pleasant and auspicious alternative performance of endurance than does *Theemithi*.

The elements of performative Hinduism in Singapore therefore assemble histories of a stigmatized labor and convict diaspora under colonialism. Public demonstrations of sacrifice in the name of a higher, religious authority and may thus be viewed as theatrical responses to marginalization in a racialized, colonially ordered society. Belonging to a pre-colonial worldview, these practices operated on moral regimes that Bataille calls “profitless expenditure” and what Joseph Roach calls “performance of waste” (123). Roach suggests that sacrificial rituals, such as the ones Sinha and Krishnan describe, conspicuously expend labor, resources, goods, productive time and in the case of animal sacrifices, blood and life, “strategies for coping with superabundance” in both agrarian and technologically advanced societies (*ibid*). Laboring within the colonial economy of cash crops—primarily rubber, and to a lesser extent, teak, cashew and other cash crops – Malayan Indians actively enabled the geometric multiplication of nature’s activities as indentured agricultural workers, overseers (*kanganis*³⁶). *Thaipusam*, *Theemithi* and other forms of public, ritual worship, when viewed as “performances of waste” demonstrate the Tamil-Hindu Singaporean milieu’s resistance to authority, a form of profitless expenditure not merely for entertainment or catharsis, but as spectacular forms of devotion.

Bharatanatyam as a public performance of devotion delinks itself from affective registers of shock or terror linked with atrocity figures and apparently atrocious forms of ritual worship

³⁵ Draupadiamman worship is rare in India, and Krishnan has traced its origins to a small community of boat repair folk in the village of Vadakku Poigayoor (tr. village to the north of the river *Poigai*) (“Expressions of Faith” 141).

³⁶ Indentured labor in colonial Malaya was managed by the *Kangani* system, in which an indian overseer, the *kangani* (from Tamil “kan” - eyes, “kani” one who sees), would manage both the recruitment of labor from rural India and their management once overseas (See Fuller, 1997).

mentioned above. It is also significant that Bharatanatyam dance, as the nominated practice surrogating sacrificial rituals of the Tamil Hindu community, is performed by women; to quote Roach again, “In an economy of slave-produced abundance, expensive young women may come to signify the importance of excess itself, the symbolic crossing point of material production/consumption and reproductive fecundity” (42). Though the Malayan plantation economy was not facilitated by slave labor but by indentured servitude, elite Indians in mid-century Singapore certainly supplemented their female children with a rigorous education in Indian classical performing arts, to enable them to perform a respectable and desirable civilizational ideal of Indianness.

Roach’s theory of surrogacy relies on the notion of rethinking the human performer as an effigy, who can be a medium that channels a community’s aspirations and ensures its continuity in the midst of social upheaval yet is expendable as sacrifice. The effigy, after all, is often destroyed at the end of its performance duration (36). Roach identifies that those nominated as the surrogate are often marked as special either by virtue of their profession - actors, dancers, priests, street maskers, statesmen (and) celebrities...” or because of their marginalized social position - “...freaks, children...” or, as in the case of Singapore’s Indian community, girls and young women (36). In the place of the many atrocity figures perpetuated in the public sphere by the unfortunate circumstances of Malayan and Singaporean Indian life, young women and girls from elite social classes in the 1950s who were encouraged by their families to learn and practice Bharatanatyam, offered the resplendent figure of the dancer as an auspicious substitute.

The Labor of Surrogation

Priya Srinivasan offers a view of Indian classical dance beyond its spectacular potency by rethinking them as forms of transnational labor. Directing our attention to the conditions of production of artmaking, Srinivasan rightly identifies that Indian cultural nationalism and Indian diasporic production relies on the labor of Indian classical dancers, young women of South Asian descent. They sacrifice large amounts of time - hours in a day, days in a week, weeks in a month, months in a year, and several years of childhood and adolescence to reproduce twentieth century middle class Indian forms of social relationality (“Sweating Saris” 142-164). Inculcating dance into the bodies of Singaporean children is a decade-long project. At a conference on Bharatanatyam in Southeast Asia held at the National University of Singapore, Santha Bhaskar outlined the curriculum as follows:

“Our 10-year program starts the students at elementary (levels) one, two, etc., and progresses to year one culminating in year seven [*sic*], after which they are ready to prepare for their diploma program where they perform a *margam* or practical exam, and sit for a written theory exam, followed by and present [*sic*] a written research paper on a given subject. After the diploma exam, the dancers learn another style of dance, which is *kathakali*, a unique theatrical story-telling art for six months. They learn to express the nine emotions or the *navarasas*, in detail and practice the *sanchari abhinaya*—creative expression—for a particular sentence. This training leads students to a stage performance. After this the students are awarded the diploma certificate. The diploma holders are then invited to join Bhaskar’s junior dance company. A panel of judges auditions them. They undergo vigorous [*sic*] training and are included in Bhaskar’s Academy company productions and (are) offered minor performance opportunities. This creates a pipeline of

professional dancers for the company which performs in Singapore and tours worldwide.” (Bhaskar, 2018)

Bhaskar goes on to describe the elementary training given to children as young as four years old: “Elementary one and two students learn the basic technique of Bharatanatyam *adavus*—that is steps—and theory comprising fifty-two hand gestures, mudras and their usages, feet positions, neck and head positions and their usages. Technique is skill and to develop skill at a very early stage, is very important to understand *adavus* or steps, which are *nritha*, pure dance movements, and what dance feels like. In addition, students learn a simple dance to understand and get a feel of how music and movements are connected. This simple dance item they will perform on stage for the practical exam. Later they are tested on oral theory, occasionally we bring external examiners who examine the students. Their feedback is shared with the students to improve their technique and their performance as a whole. Indian dance is so connected to *Carnatic* music and (we) encourage every student to study music to understand the complexity of rhythms and music compositions. Without basic knowledge of music, the study of dance is shallow and superficial.” (Bhaskar, 2018)

Besides technical training, Bhaskar articulates what is well-known among communities of Indian dance practice, which is that training in performing arts inculcate a specific moral paradigm within students:

“The vision of our school based on dance education is to adapt a holistic approach to cover other dimensions of learning such as values in life, together with dance study. Dance teaches values in life such as patience, discipline, perseverance, commitment and acceptance. According to the western system of the study of dance, there are four aspects: kinesthetics - moving and learning, aesthetics- general understanding of literature, cognitive - intellectual thinking perceiving and processing, psychological - feeling and interactive [...] This (western) technique of learning can be adapted into the system of Indian dance studying [*sic*]. The knowledge already exists in Indian dance studying. According to Indian tradition, learning happens in four ways: *sravana* - hearing, *manana*-reflection of lessons, *vividha sanam* - meditate on correct understanding, *sakshatkaram* - actualization or correct delivery. This knowledge was hidden but passed on to the generation for some unknown reason.” (Bhaskar, 2018)

The implicit value of an Indian performing arts education lies, as the quote above suggests, in its immersive and embodied nature, offering what Tomie Hahn calls “sensational knowledge”, as sense-perception, faculties of sight, hearing, memory and intellect are culturally sensitized. Hahn links dance technique with Marcel Mauss’s concept of “techniques of the body”, where culture beliefs are passed-on through non-verbal practices. By way of Susan Leigh Foster, Hahn suggests that strict and high standards of adjudication embed cultural principles into dancing bodies, such as those that Bhaskar mentions above -- “patience, discipline, perseverance, commitment and acceptance”—both channel and reflect communally shared values. Dance training institutes therefore instill, consolidate and expand the affective dimensions of communal life through the transmission of implicit, sensational knowledge (5). The learning, practice and performance of dance, in training hands to form mudras, to capture and resound rhythm through intricate and powerful stamping of feet, to spin steadily, and sculpt

air with the body, is labor made visible. Barring a few famous dancers whose star power saturates the small, international market for ethnic or world dance, Indian dancers are what Leigh Claire La Berge calls “un-wageable laborers” and the work of dancing, a form of de commodified labor, “a kind of work that is not compensated through a wage or available through market purchase” (3-4).

Indian classical performing arts institutions therefore facilitates a space that is discontinuous from other forms of education and acculturation available to young Indians in Singapore. These institutions offer embodied education through the arts that engage students with traditional regimes of value that prioritize family, elders and community over pure academic or corporate success. Within the standard Singaporean education system, students are taught to navigate a highly competitive academic system designed to produce competent professionals with advanced skills in science, technology and management fields. Pragmatic concerns dominate, with the goal of employment in corporate offices of multinational companies, or in professional fields such as medicine or law, or various agencies within the Singapore Civil Services. Immersive and embodied engagement with Indian classical dance and music facilitates a form of intergenerational knowledge transmitted through the senses. Bharatanatyam dancer and dramaturg Nidya Shanthini Manokara suggests that learning Bharatanatyam was more-or-less an obligatory form of cultural reproduction of Singaporean Indian families, a way of “keeping up with the family dynamics” (23).

Indian Performing arts institutions also offer young, Singapore-born Indians a Hindu religious and cultural education, often the only site within Singapore’s multiracial milieu where complex facets of Hinduism—such as polytheism and idol worship—are articulated and explained (Sinha, “*Hinduism in Contemporary Singapore*” 837). Parents of students in these institutions cite the cultural education provided by institutions like SIFAS and Bhaskars as having tremendous value for providing immersion, engagement and informed participation in Hindu culture. Often, these parents were themselves students under Santha Bhaskar or other senior dance teachers and remember dance class as the first site where they were exposed to Hindu culture, its symbolic, narrative, material and corporeal elements. Ambujah Thiru, a Singapore-born Bharatanatyam dancer who is now faculty at Bhaskars Arts Academy, says that when she choreographs new work for her students’ *arangetrams*³⁷—a sort of graduation performance—or for annual dance productions staged by her institute every year, she sources her subject matter from religious literature and draws musical inspiration from the field of Indian classical, semi-classical and devotional music. The labor of learning dance extends beyond the physical act of dancing in studios and on stages - it is also the labor of learning, reproducing and performing a refined, high-cultural Hindu worldview. The *narthaki*, as human effigy, enables a forgetting of contentious convict and coolie figures, as diasporic histories of indentured labor recede to the socio-cultural background. As seen in the case of K.P. Bhaskar’s *Shakuntala*, texts selected to be choreographed as Bharatanatyam performances channel pan-Indian Hinduism, locating the Singaporean Indian community’s entry into globally recognized Indian civilizational discourse.

Embodying Indian Femininity

The work of reproducing Indian high culture in Singapore is undeniably gendered. In a statement given at the occasion of being conferred the Singapore Cultural Medallion by the

³⁷ *Arangetram* or “entry to the stage”, is the debut performance that signals the completion of formal dance education and marks the entry of the dancer as a public performer.

Ministry of Culture in 1990, Santha Bhaskar categorically states that there are no male dancers in Singapore, though male dancers established the practice of dancing in both Singapore and Malaysia³⁸. Even K.P. Bhaskar retired from active performance by the 1960s. In a later public address in 2014 at the National University of Singapore, Santha Bhaskar acknowledges that male dancers continue to be painfully limited in number. Among female dancers, there is a problem of continuity, as female dancers tend to “get married and disappear from the scene”. Yet Bhaskar’s Arts alongside SIFAS, Temple of Fine Arts, Apsaras Arts and numerous other small and large dance schools teach hundreds of dance students each year and have collectively produced thousands of dance diploma holders over the past seven decades. The labor of dancing is thus *not* aimed at professional artistic careers for women, and rarely do men pursue it, even as a hobby.

Viewed from the lens of profitless expenditure, however, the vast amounts of resources that the families of dancers put into paying for classes, expensive cotton saris for training and stitched silk saris for performance, jewelry and *chelengai*—finely crafted bells set in bands of leather tied around the feet—are not ultimately returned in the form of commercially successful performances or professional careers for a majority of practitioners. Instead, they circulate in an economy of cultural capital and entail social reproduction, as the labor of *narthakis* are sacrificed to sustain a constructed history of Singaporean Indian tradition.

This function, of imparting norms of gender performance through dance classes, continues. In 2018, the Esplanade Theatres by the Bay and the National Arts Council coproduce a restaging of Santha Bhaskar’s *Manohara* with Bhaskars Arts Academy, to commemorate it as an exemplary performance of Singaporean-Thai cultural collaboration. A group of eight female dancers assemble at the center of the Bhaskar’s studio, two Thai dancers present among them. They stand out as non-Indian not just because of their noticeably east-Asian physical features as at least two other Bhaskars’ bharatanatyam dancers appear bi-racial with a mix of east and southeast Asian facial features. Rather, they are recognizable by difference in their rehearsal apparel. All of Santha Bhaskar’s student-dancers wear either cotton *saree* or Kurta-Pajama-Dupatta—a three-piece outfit consisting of a kurta, a long tunic that falls well-below the hips down to the knees, cotton pajama bottoms or slacks, and a *dupatta* or a long scarf that is draped across one shoulder like a sash and then wrapped tightly over the waist. This “dance uniform” is not an isolated demand by the teachers and choreographers at Bhaskar’s Arts Academy. Rather this modest clothing ensemble is preferred by Indian classical dance teachers around the world as it serves a dual purpose – the dance uniform veils the hips, thighs and breasts of young female students, while still allowing the dance teacher to view and correct the alignment of the knees, shoulders and hips.

This delicate balance of exposure and concealment of their daughters, so vital to Indian middle-class parents and teachers, is not demanded of Chayanee Sunthonmalai and Montakarn Roikaew, the Thai dancers. Sunthonmalai and Roikaew are dressed in t-shirts, without the *dupatta* covering their chests, and loose cotton pants with a scarf tied around their hips, much like Bala Saravanan Loganathan, the lone male dancer from the Bhaskar’s ensemble, who waits in the wings for his solo act. The cross-cultural encounter lays bare the gender politics of the

³⁸ Other male Indian dancers who set up schools in Malaya in the 1950s, including V.K Sivadas and Gopal Shetty, married their female students, and in doing so formed a life-long, powerful personal-professional alliance (Thiagarajan, 2017a, 2017b). In Malaysia however, “the visibly powerful male public performer” was a central feature in the rising popularity of Indian classical dances (Thiagarajan 71), whereas in Singapore, K.P. Bhaskar’s visibility on stage recedes and the focus shifts to Santha Bhaskar and other female Bharatanatyam dancers.

Indian classical dance classroom; here, the dangers of public performance beset upon the dancing adolescent female body are contained and disciplined not just by enforcing strict dance technique, but also in managing the sexualization of dancing women by controlling acceptable forms of dress and bodily comportment in the classroom and on stage. However, the cross-cultural encounter also denotes the limits of such disciplining; while Indian classical dancers come to understand early in their training, that modesty in dress and behavior reflects their chaste character, this understanding is hardly ever made explicit. Meanwhile, none present, least of all the Santha Bhaskar, denote any displeasure in the appearance of the Thai dancers. The intersection of ethnographic insight and a knowledge of dance history however, suggests that strict norms of modesty for female dancers in the Bharatanatyam classroom work to deflect any association of young women from wealthy and middle-class families with the calumnious history of the *devadasi* or temple dancer, as sexually promiscuous. Though they dance the *devadasi*'s form, these young women repurpose the labor of dancing towards different ends. Today, their extensive training is called upon to perform a notion of Singaporean cosmopolitanism while retaining the auspiciousness of the Bharatanatyam dancer for the Singaporean Indian community. The Thai dancers are exempt from this burden of history, and hence may wear what they like.

Surrogating Singaporean Multiracialism

In the past decade, alongside her reputation as a doyen of multiracial choreography, Santha Bhaskar has also often been associated with terms like “living history” and “intangible heritage”. In 2018, when Bhaskar turned 76 and the stamp-issue she posed for turned 61, rumors began surfacing that Bharatanatyam had been chosen as one of the many practices selected by the Singapore National Heritage Board’s *Roots* project, to be protected as intangible cultural heritage. This move provokes mixed responses, as the desire for heritage seems ironic for a nation less than a century old, assembled by the British colonial project and unable to make historic, cultural or sanguine claims to a national *ethnos*, besides the one created politically and discursively. As Dr. Chee Meng Wong, heritage researcher and longtime student of the Bhaskars observes, six to seven decades of cultural history in Singapore may mean very little when compared to the claim of two thousand years of heritage that classical dance in India can lay claim to. Motivations for a cultural identity rooted in shared heritage is therefore a challenge for a nation of imported invented traditions and Bharatanatyam’s civilizational claims can be rendered useful for this purpose.

However, such bureaucratic rearticulations of local practices create anxiety. At a conference on Indian dance hosted by the National University of Singapore in 2018, practitioners including Bhaskar herself expressed fears that as intangible heritage, the practice of Bharatanatyam would now be museumized, and that state funding imperatives would be revised to favor the work of preservation over innovation. Such fears are dismissed as largely baseless by administrators at the Singapore National Arts Council in charge of disbursing funds for traditional art forms. In the next chapter, I identify creativity in Singapore, particularly for traditional artists as being embedded within political rationality. As a result, “tradition” works as a genre shaped by the affect of anticipation, as artists strive to identify what kinds of work will qualify as tradition apposite to cultural policy mandates. Between contrary demands for “innovation” and expectations of “authenticity” in the traditional arts, the choreographer is called upon to render a signature style of Bharatanatyam that can claim identifications beyond ancient India, toward southeast Asia and beyond.

Do these developments, enabled through choreographic reassembly threaten to substitute the Bharatanatyam dancer as a beloved icon of Indian tradition reconstituted in Singapore? While Indian dancing enacts different forms of affective labor, preserving intergenerational cultural knowledge, assimilating values cherished by the familial, communal and social groupings that support training and performance, trained dancers can now also claim actual economic rewards for their labor, in the Singaporean performing-arts market. As the local Indian dance community wrestles with contradictory demands for both authenticity and novelty, the following chapter identifies ongoing choreographic negotiations between choreographer, the dancing community and cultural-bureaucratic instruments of the state

Chapter 2: Bharatanatyam and Buddhist Diplomacy



Fig 3. NUS Indian dancers stage *The Nalanda Project* at the University Culture Center Dance Studio Singapore in March 2010. Source: NUS Centre For the Arts.

Singapore, March 2010. A cosmopolitan audience have gathered at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) concert hall, the University Cultural Center for the opening night of the NUS Arts Festival (NAF). This annual event offers a mix of student-made and professional performing arts works in a range of genres, including English theatre, Chinese and Indian musical ensembles, Western symphony orchestras, Chinese, Indian, and Malay traditional, and western contemporary and urban dance. Many of these works are incubated and premiered by the NAF platform before they are picked up by more prestigious theatres. The festival theme for the year 2011 is "Asia Live," and one of its many offerings is a small, work-in-progress lecture demonstration about a Singapore-made Bharatanatyam work called *The Nalanda Project*. This work, produced by the National University of Singapore's Center For the Arts (NUS CFA), is choreographed by Santha Bhaskar and performed by the dancers of CFA's Indian dance group, with support from the Nalanda Sriwijaya Center, a research center at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and the Asian Civilizations Museum, Singapore. The lecture-demonstration features a short Bharatanatyam choreography, with dancers dressed in the saffron robes of Buddhist monks, demonstrating the application of Buddhist meditative *hastha-mudras* (hand gestures) and *sthanakas* (position of feet) set into motion as *nrtta* (abstract, non-representational dance usually featuring intricate footwork) [Fig. 1].

The choreography is set to Buddhist chants interspersed with vocal music, presented by a live, five-person ensemble of accompanying Carnatic musicians. In the lecture demonstration that follows, Santha Bhaskar as choreographer and me, as researcher, presented our notes and

ongoing processes, situating this work in relation to the ancient Buddhist monastery at Nalanda in Bihar, India. I juxtapose features of Bharatanatyam technique with Buddhist iconography, emphasizing the subtle distinctions and parallels in gesture, stance and expression drawn from a visual library of sculptures, paintings and votive artefacts consolidated after four months of research at the NSC. Santha Bhaskar then discusses the implications of these juxtapositions for thematic innovation within Bharatanatyam choreography, framing them as an opportunity to draw from multiple traditions to link them in an unprecedented way. Following this, the musicians and dancer chant *Om Mani Padme Hum*, associated with bodhisattva³⁹ Avalokitesvara (Studholme 2002). The audience is invited to contemplate on the notion of reality as emptiness, the fundamental metaphysical precept of Buddhism.

I use this opening to discuss choreographer Santha Bhaskar's use of Bharatanatyam's quintessentially Indian performative assemblage—its dance technique, Sanskrit and Tamil poetry, Carnatic musical accompaniment, the stitched sari costume and South Indian temple jewels -- to enliven novel narratives for Singapore that retroactively historicizes its role in inter-Asian circulations via the trope of shared Buddhist pasts. Bharatanatyam choreographers have taken up Buddhist themes in the past, most notably in the work of V. Subramaniam who explicitly created works to test his hypothesis that the Indian performing and poetic art forms, particularly bardic forms of sung and danced poetry rooted in the Sangam era (6th century BCE – 3rd Century CE), catered largely to secular themes (2-10). Performances featuring Gowthama Buddha, the founding preceptor of Buddhist philosophy and practice, as one of the ten *avatars* of Vishnu, a major deity of the Hindu pantheon, are also seen in the popular practice of Bharatanatyam. Regardless, a vast majority of Bharatanatyam's standard performance, in India and in various diasporic sites around the world, draws from Hindu mythology. This chapter considers a work of the Indian classical dance form Bharatanatyam performed as a vehicle for inter-Asian soft-diplomatic ventures in Singapore. Widely practiced by Singapore's ethnic Tamil-Hindu minority, Bharatanatyam took a "Buddhist turn" in the early 2010s. Refraining from Bharatanatyam's standard recourse to Hindu mythology, several high-profile stage productions, beginning with the Bharatanatyam project discussed above, which was eventually developed into a ninety-minute production in 2011 renamed as *Anweshana: The Search for Nalanda* (2011), have featured Buddhist themes or otherwise made explicit links with Indic iconography, mythology and historic narratives found in Southeast Asia.

In *Anweshana* Bhaskar employs choreographic reassembly—the deliberate reshuffling of dance technique, iconography and formal elements of the dance form—to project cosmopolitan values to Indian Bharatanatyam, in ways that meet local contingencies of dance making in Singapore. This chapter centers the choreographer's efforts at negotiating the regulatory regimes that contour Singaporean cultural production. Besides discursive interventions into Indian nationalist framings of Buddhism, I pay attention to how Singapore's participation in Inter-Asian Nalanda revival efforts has had the inadvertent efforts of dislodging Bharatanatyam's position as the quintessential dance of the postcolonial Indian nation state and contemporary

³⁹ Bodhisattvas are compassionate beings on the path towards Buddhahood. In Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist understandings, bodhisattvas take on divine connotations

Hinduism. Centring the choreographer as a mediating figure, this paper integrates ethnography and dance analysis to consider how artist subjectivity and the soul of Bharatanatyam is reassembled in a city-state subject to pragmatic, neoliberal governance. As Buddhist themes in Bharatanatyam render Indianness as fungible within Buddhist and Hindu religious paradigms, dance becomes a vital site to read how Singapore's racial minority subjects position themselves in relation to shifting narratives of ethnicity, religion and national identity.

As dramaturg and one of the many dancers involved in *Anweshana*, my analysis is based on direct observation of the processes and situations that led up to its production. I am thus entangled with the practices I describe and avoid universalizing these particular configurations of Indian classical dance, diplomacy and neoliberal regulation of the arts beyond its emergent situation in and around Singapore. Rather than make epochal claims around culture or dance in South and Southeast Asia, I am concerned with identifying and diagnosing the primary preoccupations of Indian dance choreographers who are beholden to the Singapore state for funding and must expand their spectatorial communities beyond niche and discerning classical dance audiences to meet state funding criteria. I go on to conceptualize the kind of choreographic processes involved in these operations as choreographic reassembly and diagnose the type of creative work immanent within the neoliberal logic of the Singaporean creative industries as that which integrates the intuition of the professional artist with a self-reflexive, problem-solving mindset. In doing so, I characterize the shifts in subjectivity of the Bharatanatyam choreographer in Singapore, shifting from their role as *guru* or master of tradition, to an expert of cultural reassembly, materializing the future of traditional dance locally and globally.

Buddhist diplomacy – Indic vs Inter-Asia perspectives

During the question-and-answer session following the lec-dem⁴⁰ performance described above, an audience member stands up to congratulate me on my research but insists on a basic correction: India is the birthplace of *Sanathana Dharma*⁴¹ (the eternal law), she says, which means that before British colonialism, we did not have this concept of “religion” at all. Speaking from an Indian point of view, she continues, this is what makes our culture great. “There is no need to make such distinctions”, she says, “though it is very nice that you are able to find parallels between Hindu and Buddhist art, they are essentially all one.” This response is reflective of popular understandings of the relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism in India, where the explicit theological, iconographic, historical and political divergences between the two are underplayed. Most practicing Hindus in India consider Buddha as an *avatār* (incarnation) of the Hindu god Vishnu. In the Indian national sphere that is today sharply inflected with resurgent Hindu nationalist sentiments, evidence of Indic culture—Hindu or Buddhist art, architecture, linguistic features and practices— in Southeast and East Asia, are contained within histories of Hindu-Buddhist Indianization of Asia⁴² (Scott, 2016, 141). Yet,

⁴⁰ A lec-dem is a term used in the Indian classical dance world and is short for lecture-demonstration, where aspects of dancing and enactment are interspersed with spoken explanations by the dancer or choreographer.

⁴¹ Sanatana Dharma is a relatively modern view of Hinduism that resolves sectarianism and integrates teachings from the Vedas, Upanishads, and other Hindu texts.

⁴² Besides Scott, Sheldon Pollock also discusses Hindu-Buddhist Asia as a spatial referent in addressing Indic cultural and political diffusion across South and Southeast Asia in *Language of Gods in the World of Men*.

new discourses of pan-Asianism predicated on shared Buddhist pasts disrupt these narratives of Indianization.

Buddhism and in diplomacy, has a long history, beginning in the ancient world circa 543-542 BCE up until the religion's decline in India between the fourth and twelfth centuries CE, and in the rest of Asia in the nineteenth century following European imperialist expansion (Zhang 8-22). In the ancient world, diplomacy efforts directly concerned the spread of Buddhist teachings as "the salient messages of Buddhism as a philosophical, ethical and practical system, the Sangha as disciplined and trained messengers, establishment of monasteries and universities as propagation institutions, translation of the *Tripitaka*, spread of Buddhist paraphernalia, conversion of opinion leaders such as kings and princes, and localization" (Zhang 15). Following the second world war, former Buddhist kingdoms turned into numerous, territorially bound, postcolonial nation states—Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, to name but a few—supported international Buddhist activities that were not explicitly diplomatic in nature. These activities included conferences, national-level celebrations of Buddha's birth and or nirvana and the creation of international monastic communities of *Sanghas* of different Buddhist orders (Zhang 23). In the twenty first century, cultural diplomatic projects in India, China, Japan and South Korea have reframed some Buddhist activities as soft-power and international relations projects. More controversial instances of diplomacy revolving around Buddhist concerns include the recognition of Tibet and the authority of the 14th Dalai Lama (Zhang "Buddhist Diplomacy" 25). In general, countries with significant Buddhist populations have contributed to academic and spiritual conferences, revival and establishment of Buddhist learning centers, archeological projects and organizing of exhibitions involving internationally sourced Buddhist art, votives, relics and other paraphernalia of worship. (Zhang 22-29).

As India and China are often engaged in geopolitical competition for dominance in the Indo-Pacific region, Buddhist diplomacy projects in the early 2010s offered the promise of a bridge between the two nations and several other Asian nations on the cultural-diplomatic front. Since the 20th century, both India and China have touted their Buddhist histories to project and consolidate soft power, as Buddhism's message of non-violence, tolerance and open dialogue aligns tidily with liberal humanist ethics that are now considered applicable universally. On the other hand, Buddhism has a history of steady patronage by commercial agents—bankers and businessmen were among the first to convert and donate to Buddhist causes and built monasteries and fund missionary expeditions to gain spiritual merit (Zhang 20). This borderless movement of Buddhism, through networks of monastic institutions, merchants and lay worshippers, serves as an amenable metaphor for idealized trade and political relations in the region. Buddhist diplomacy had a promising moment in the late 2000s with the East Asia summit consolidating efforts in the revival of an ancient Buddhist monastery at Nalanda, in Bihar into a contemporary, international university. The 'Nalanda University revival project' is thus a particular manifestation of inter-Asia relations in the late 2010s, which explicitly featured several projects that took to interpolating Buddhism to service emerging regional diplomatic efforts². Singaporean efforts featured strongly in this "Nalanda university revival project" that positioned the city-state as a go-between in inter-Asian solidarity efforts linking China, Southeast Asia and South Asia. As virtually all contemporary nations of Asia can claim Buddhist influences in antiquity, Singapore turns Buddhist

histories, and the ‘Nalanda university revival project’ as a fulcrum upon which contemporary inter-Asian diplomatic ties may be leveraged.

Nested Perspectives

A year after the lecture demonstration described earlier, *Anweshana: The Search for Nalanda* premiered as the opening act for the NUS Arts Festival 2011. The production is contextualized by a short video montage featuring Anweshana’s dancers. This video montage, along with projection of images and English language text between dance items, serve as important devices that explicate juxtapositions of Bharatanatyam form and Buddhist content. This juxtaposition is made through choreographic reassembly. Anthropologist and dancer Saskia Kersenboom has identified that bardic traditions in South India, in which contemporary Bharatanatyam is rooted, consists of three primary elements - *word* -poetry or other forms of text, *sound* -the musical ensemble consisting of percussion with the *mridangam*, Indian violin, small cymbals or *nattuvangam*, the Indian flute and vocalization of the text through singing, and *image*- the dancer’s body as an animating medium (“Word, Sound, Image”). Multi-media technology in Singapore’s concert halls facilitate the enhancement of traditional Bharatanatyam’s imagistic powers by explicitly drawing various perspectives nested within *Anweshana*’s performance, making its meanings accessible to cosmopolitan audiences who are not familiar with Bharatanatyam’s performance conventions. I therefore offer a description and then a reading of this video montage segment of the performance as an aspect of choreographic reassembly, where new forms of media enter in or supplement the traditional ensemble of Bharatanatyam, to relocate the work within contemporary frame.

As the house lights fade, ushering the audience into a hushed silence, the single strike of a meditation bell resounds as the words *Anweshana: The Search for Nalanda* appears projected over the darkened cyclorama. As flautist Ghanavenothan Retnam begins a mellifluous *aalap* (melodic improvisation) in a sombre, minor key, an image from the *On the Nalanda Trail* exhibition, curated by Singapore’s Asian Civilizations Museum in 2007, appears on screen with accompanying text declaring the exhibition as the inspiration behind the performance.

The montage then cuts to a video of dancer Khok Khee dressed in the saffron robes of a Buddhist monk. Khok is pictured as walking through the futuristic, garden cityscape of contemporary Singapore, on its concrete sidewalks, gazing at its glittering skyline from across Marina Bay [Fig 2]. The scene shifts next to the same figure in the thick of Raffles Place, Singapore’s skyscraper district: the same buildings we saw a moment earlier now tower over and dwarf Khok’s frame. Shots of dancer Gabriel Palai Anbu appear next, dressed in a resplendent, purple Bharatanatyam costume—a stitched sari made of silk—transitioning between typical poses in front of the Kwan Yim Thong Buddhist temple located in Waterloo Street in Singapore. As these videos are spliced between each other, text is overlaid on the video with a narrative that connects them: “*Anweshana* channels the wandering traveler in search for knowledge and locates old ideas in a new world. *Anweshana* follows a trail of revelation and transforming ideas.”

The montage now introduces a close up shot of dancer Meera Gurumurthy. Her Kohl lined eyes flank a red, tear-drop shaped *bindi*, with a pearl and gem-stone *tika* adorning the middle part of her hair, all of which explicitly mark her as a Bharatanatyam dancer. A single drop of water falls upon her closed eyes, causing her to open them. As a benign smile spreads across her lips, the text reads: “*Anweshana traces an awakening...*”



Fig. 4 A still featuring dancer Khok Kee captured from the video montage played at the outset of *Anweshana: The Search for Nalanda* at the University Culture Center in March 2011. Source: Author

The screen darkens and dancer Jayasri Narayanan walks slowly into the frame, in a softly draped, cotton sari in deep purple. She sits down, folding her legs into *sukhasana* or the easy pose of meditation, and her hands cycle through various *hastha-mudras* (hand gestures) seen in the iconography of the Buddha, indicating different stages in his quest for enlightenment. The text now reads: “*A journey from darkness to life. A corporeal study of a shared heritage spanning across Asia.*”

At this point, the image of a map appears, visualizing the circulation of Buddhism from its site of origin in ancient India in a centrifugal movement across west, Southeast and East Asia. The text now names China, Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka as important sites, with images of famous Buddhist monuments – The Giant Wild Goose Pagoda in X’ian, China, the Borobodur temple complex in Java, Indonesia and the Gal Vihara in Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka. The montage then closes with images of the ruins of Nalanda Mahavihara in India, which is the primary site of reference for this performance. The name Nalanda is broken down to its etymological root in Pali as “*Na-alam-da, insatiable in giving knowledge*”.

As the accompanying background music of flute and veena sustains the emotional register of *adbhuta* or wonder, the text succinctly supplies facts about Nalanda—the discovery and excavations of its ruins in the early 20th century and its history as an ancient and extensive Buddhist university complex that thrived between the 4th and 12th century C.E. The text also emphasizes that in its heyday, Nalanda’s appeal and authority took on continental dimensions, as the monks and scholars housed there travelled from as far as China and Southeast Asia along the terrestrial and maritime Silk route.

As researcher for this project, I co-created the video montage with cinematographer Ramchander Krishna and Santha Bhaskar to prime the audience to contextualize the Bharatanatyam performance that follows within a shuffle of contradictory elements. It presents intersecting temporalities—Asia’s ancient, pre-Islamic

past with its presumably, post-national future characterized by unrestricted circulations of people and ideas. Cultural influences—Indic, Sinic and Indo-Malayan archipelagic—are placed within a futuristic westernized cityscape, suggesting precolonial cultures as being disinterred from their particular configurations in the remote past and now made available as elements embedded within neoliberal futures

Most significantly, however, the video offers three nested perspectives of the dancer within this shuffle of elements. First, dressed as the Buddhist monk, the Bharatanatyam dancer is seen as gazing into Singapore-as-Asia's futuristic cityscape, contemplating their position within its post-traditional, rationalist calculations. Second, dressed in the traditional Bharatanatyam costume, dancing in front of a Buddhist temple, the dancer becomes one element of the oriental salad that is offered for touristic consumption within Singapore's framings of itself as compacted experience of Asia. Singapore with its multiracial, and multireligious population of ethnic Chinese, Malays and Indians, has long utilized the performing arts as a site of multiracial fantasies (Chong, 2011, 26). Third, using the Buddhist trope of enlightenment, the dancer is poised as a self-reflexive agent awakening to the creative possibilities that inhere in these contradictory framings. This awakening is gentle, like a falling water drop on the dancer's skin, as reworking Buddhist themes into the vocabulary of Bharatanatyam is a subtle transformation, made possible by a combination of political and institutional will, choreographic expertise and careful reorganizing of knowledge from diverse academic domains, as we will see below.

This montage also invites polysemic considerations and can be read as a critique of the condition of traditional dance – be they Indian, Malay or Chinese— in Singapore. As the colonial structuring of cultural interrelations between the races in Singapore continues to inform both Singaporean cultural policy and arts programming, dancers of classical or traditional forms must contend with both the orientalist framings of their bodies and performance, in addition to attending to neoliberal demands for efficient yet relentless creative production. These dichotomous and paradoxical framings of cultural practice in Singapore therefore provoke artists to find ways to creatively resolve them. Bhaskar's entanglement with Singaporean Buddhist diplomatic project aligns well with this reading, as we shall see below.

Bharatanatyam and Buddhist Diplomacy

The map referenced in the video montage is from the *On the Nalanda Trail* exhibition catalogue. The exhibition was a collaborative venture between Singapore's National Heritage Board and its Foreign Ministry in conjunction with the 2nd East Asia Summit—then including delegates of the ASEAN member nations as well as China, Japan, Australia, and India—organized in Singapore in 2007 (Krishnan "Introduction" 9). The exhibition featured Buddhist art — sculptures, scrolls, artifacts from archeological digs and paintings retrieved from across the broad expanse of Asia —from Afghanistan to Sumatra in Indonesia, from Northwestern China down to Sri Lanka.

The most celebrated object in this exhibition was a 9th century copper-plate inscription sourced from Nalanda, in present-day Bihar in India, declaring that *Devapala*, the Pala King of *Bengala* (which spans western Indian states of Bihar, Odissa and West Bengal as well as parts of Bangladesh) had made a land grant towards the construction of a monastery at the site of *Nalanda*. This grant was a bequest of the King Balaputradeva of Srivijaya in *Yavadwipa* (Island of Java, in present day Indonesia) (Krishnan "Transmission of Buddhist ideology" 23). As material evidence of precolonial South and Southeast Asian cultural diplomacy, the copperplate

inscription and the monastery it anticipates, which now lies in ruins, are the cornerstone of the *On the Nalanda Trail* exhibition. It also formed the basis of the “Nalanda University revival project” conceived at the 2007 East Asia Summit, in the task of establishing a secular, international university of global standards at the site of the ancient Buddhist monastery at Nalanda. Singapore’s pivotal contributions to this project included both knowledge production initiatives at the Nalanda Sriwijaya Center (NSC) at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, as well as the dissemination of inter-Asian heritage-narratives in the public sphere via its museum, arts and heritage industry complex. *Anweshana* is directly related to these efforts as a brainchild of the National University Center for the Arts, with the Nalanda Sriwijaya Centre’s (NSC) as research partner.



Fig. 5. Image used in video montage of *Anweshana*: The search for Nalanda. Panel depicting Shweta Padmanabhan demonstrating transposal of Bharatanatyam pose typically used to portray Hindu goddesses to instead depict the bodhisattva, Tara. Source: NUS Center For the Arts

Anweshana is an extraordinary manifestation of the NSC’s knowledge production project, standing out as a lavish work of Bharatanatyam concert dance in stark contrast to other more banal academic projects, which included consolidating a center for archeological research, organizing academic conferences and publications. As dramaturg for the production, the NSC invited me to take on a research fellowship to study Buddhist histories that link the Indian subcontinent, the Malay-Indonesian archipelago and the Far-East. Santha Bhaskar, *Anweshana*’s artistic director, not only reassembled my research—gathered from disparate academic disciplines of art history, religion, dance, music and multimedia performance—into dance, but also retained the cohesiveness of Bharatanatyam technique and form while doing so.

In brief, Santha Bhaskar's choreographic work in *Anweshana* can be described as a transposal of corporeal elements –*angika* (gesture or standardized positions of limbs (Sk. *śārira*), face (*mukhaja*) and the entire body (*cēstakṛita*))—as well as narrative tropes, genres of poetry, song and dance used for Hindu mythology in conventional Bharatanatyam, with the meditative gestures, iconography and mythic narratives of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism. It is this shuffling of existing elements in Bharatanatyam that allow the dance form to have interchangeable identifications with secular Indian nationalism, contemporary configurations of political Hinduism, diplomatic Buddhism and varying notions of 'Asianness' more broadly. In other words, careful and considered transposal of elements attended by expert practitioners renders Bharatanatyam as fungible across cultural and national domains.

Santha Bhaskar and later, choreographer Aravinth Kumaraswamy, use processes of what I term choreographic reassembly, to hold on to ethnic and civilizational discourses around Bharatanatyam salient in Indian and Singaporean national contexts, but “discover fungible aspects of variation” – as with the incorporation of Buddhist and southeast Asian themes in dance—that allow multivalent national, religious and cultural identifications (Ong, “Fungible Life” 17). I apply this notion of fungibility to Singapore-made choreography of Bharatanatyam, which takes advantage of colonial discourses and sedimented attitudes around race, in service of new global logics that inform Singapore's creative industries.). Aihwa Ong develops the concept of fungibility in relation to Singapore's neoliberal calculations over genomic data generated in Singaporean scientific labs from its local Chinese, Indian and Malay populations. Through a mix of logical and discursive maneuvers, this data is positioned as relevant knowledge for developing pharmaceutical products tailored to these same racial/ethnic groups globally. Here Singapore's multiracial demographic discourse, which retains British colonial categorizations of its heterogeneous groups of people as either Chinese, Malay Indian and Other (or CMIO)⁴³, becomes a useful semantic tool to market Singaporean bio-medical and genetic research as widely applicable, “Asian” science. Ong identifies that Singaporean scientific innovation lies in coding and shifting existing bits of information—here genomic data points—in pluripotent ways that can service different global markets for genetic data. With seemingly simple moves that are nevertheless attentive to shifting, transnational relations of political power and capital, these choreographers shift the future of Bharatanatyam as a global form, as I describe below.

Choreographic reassembly is best illustrated in *Anweshana*'s central piece, *Adi-Buddha varnam*⁴⁴, which describes aspects of the first cosmic, Buddha [Fig 5]. This is not the historical figure of Siddhartha Gautama, who is known to be the founder of Buddhism. Rather, the piece describes the *ādi* or the primordial Buddha, a demiurgic figure known to Vajrayana Buddhists as the self-emanating, self-originating Buddha, present before anything else existed. The second half of the piece depicts the pantheon of male divinities that emanate from the *Adi Buddha*, namely, the six *Dhyāni* Buddhas of Vajrayana Buddhism, *Amogāsiddhi*, *Amitabha*, *Vajrasattva*, *Vairocana*, *Ratnasambhava* and *Aksobhya*, each personifying the unique qualities of the Buddha and each presiding deities of their own universes. The historical and socio-cultural rationale

⁴³ See Goh 2007: 236.

⁴⁴ A *varnam* consists of short a poem, interspersed with segments of *swara* (musical notation that is sung as such) and *jathis* – non-representational dance that is supported by vocalized, percussive syllables, set within tight rhythmic cycles that progressively increase in tempo. As physically demanding piece that often exceeds 20 minutes, the *varnam* is exemplary of the Bharatanatyam dance tradition

established by the video montage thus fully recedes to the background and the performance shifts to the mythic-cosmic plane.



Fig 5. “Adi Buddha Varnam” staged for *Anweshana: The Search for Nalanda* at the University Culture Center in March 2011.
Source: NUS Centre For the Arts

Like most *varnams*, the *Adi Buddha varnam* too is a panegyric in the *bhakti* (devotional) mode, where attributes and mythical exploits of the deity are described through *abhinaya* (histrionic enactment⁴⁵). The dancer takes on the role of both the devotee, as well as that of the particular god or goddess they address. In saffron colored saris, the ten dancers on stage therefore evoke Buddhist monks as well as the Buddha-like figures they contemplate.

Structurally, the *adi budha varnam* most resembles the *Dasavathara* varnam, a famous *kriti* composed by Swathi Thirunal (1813-1846) and entering the Bharatanatyam repertoire in the Kalakshetra in the mid twentieth century. The *Dasavathara*, which describes the ten *avatārs* of the Hindu God Vishnu. Traditional renditions of the *Dasavathara* varnam, first describe Vishnu as the supreme overlord of the manifest universe who protects the weak and maintains order. Following this, every verse succinctly describes the outer form and a well-known exploit of Vishnu as an *avatār*– for

⁴⁵ Abhinaya consists of gesture, costume and makeup and *sattva*- see *Natyasastra* Chapter VIII, Ram accurately defines *abhinaya* as encompassing meanings beyond its common translation as “mimeo”, involving “facial expressions and hand gestures that accentuate or emphasize the verses being sung by the performer” (Ram, 266).

instance, as *Narasimha* (half-man, half lion), as the ideal man Rama, or as beguiling Krishna. This transposal, however, is made carefully and requires an understanding of how stories of Vedic deities in the *puranas* (a body of Hindu texts) and those of Bodhisattvas in the Buddhist *suttas* and *agamās* have a different ontological and philosophical basis. The *puranas* describe a world that has multiple dimensions, of which human beings perceive only one, mundane level. The stories of *Vishnu* are not considered fables within the Hindu worldview, but accounts of the descent of Vishnu into the mundane world to restore its order. The Bodhisattva figures on the other hand are tools for contemplations rather than gods or goddesses in the Hindu traditions, as Buddhist thought is firmly grounded in the mundane world and the emptiness of any world beyond. In the Hindu temple dance tradition, dance and music traditions come together to perform place-myths associated with the temple deity as a form of *smriti*—memory—of what happened in the encounters between human and divine beings in ages past. The word *smriti* however, can also be used in another sense, as it is used in Buddhist practice, not as memory, but as a form of descriptive contemplation. The *AdiBuddha varnam* is described in *Anweshana*’s performance brochure as a *Buddhanusmriti* or a meditative contemplation of Buddha in choreography. The lyrics of this *varnam*, penned in a mix of Tamil and Sanskrit by Bhaskar herself, describes the *Adi Buddha* in various forms: as *jagad-dharana* or world-bearer, a nominal descriptor typically ascribed to Vishnu. Buddha is also *nyana mudalvan* – the primordially enlightened. *Adi Buddha* is *swayambhu* or self-emanating in the *chaitya* (the meditative hall), shining the light of knowledge with his *vajra* – the thunderbolt of awareness—that cleaves the world of *maya* or illusion. The piece then describes the Buddhas of the six directions as having unique *sthanaka* (position of feet), a *hastha-mudra* (hand gesture) and a divine beast as conveyance, in this case, the serpent, elephant, peacock, lion and falcon, in a manner that is reminiscent of Vishnu’s avatars in the *Dasavatara*.

The *varnam* therefore retains its coherence as a piece that fits Bharatanatyam conventions, even as it evolves beyond its roots in the Hindu temple and court. However, the accoutrements of performance – the design of the stitched saris, the *selengai* (thick leather anklets set with rows of jingling bells), and temple jewelry—continue to visually reference Bharatanatyam dance, as its performance conventions and techniques work to ground the viewer within familiar aesthetic environs. This subtle work of reordering and juxtaposition of Bharatanatyam’s existing elements to suit emerging contingencies— as alluded to in the video montage —is the work of choreographic reassembly.

Transnational dimensions of choreographic reassembly

In considering the technique of choreography espoused by Singapore’s Bharatanatyam practitioners as reassembly, and to understand the scale of this activity as transnational, I invite the reader to consider Bharatanatyam first as an assemblage of choreographic and performance elements that can be pulled apart and reordered to materialize diverse cultural affiliations, and secondly, as a global form, with standard features of performance and pedagogy having crystallized in ways contingent to the diverse global sites where Indian transnationals or diaspora have chosen to espouse them. I develop this idea of from Collier and Ong’s conceptual model of global assemblages, an analytical frame in which emergent phenomena are studied to identify the interaction between globally mobile forms of knowledge and practice, such as Bharatanatyam, and situated political factors (11). Beyond the more banal implications of choreographic

reassembly in service of new geopolitical agendas, this kind of creative work is also intricate artistic labor, with material and affective dimensions.

Bharatanatyam Dance scholar Avanti Meduri describes how Bharatanatyam's reformers in the mid twentieth century, chief proponents being Rukmini Devi Arundale and T. Balasaraswathy, had to selectively amplify and edit the aspects of *sadir or chinnamelam* as pre-colonial temple dance was known, to perform competing notions of Indian classicism in service of emerging, postcolonial Indian modernity ("Bharatanatyam as a Global Dance" 19- 22). Bharatanatyam's stitched sari, its bejeweled and floral accoutrements, its Carnatic musical accompaniment and its modes of training and pedagogy, form an ensemble of elements have been naturalized as an indispensable part of the tradition— to such an extent that to deviate from these conventions is considered a deviation from tradition itself. Priya Srinivasan has articulated how the normative adherence to these conventions now sustain a thriving, transnational economy of silk, costume jewelry and technical expertise of the dance that circulates between Indian cultural hubs – the south Indian city of Chennai in particular—and the global sites where Indian diaspora and transnationals continue to stage their affinities to an elite, global Indian identity ("A 'Material'-ist reading"). Yet Indian classical dance is not merely a material assemblage of signifiers that index reinvented Indian classicism; it is also a performative and affective assemblage that produces emotional attachments in its spectatorial communities. Kalpana Ram importantly describes the ensemble of dance and musical techniques – *nrtta* (abstract dance), *rāga* (melodic frameworks or scales) and *tāla*— rooted in precolonial performance traditions that continue to work within the ensemble of contemporary Bharatanatyam, to generate an affective experience that transcends the plane of mundane life (265). Rather than the generation of pathos and catharsis associated with Platonic notions of theatrical spectatorship, the efficacy of performance in the Indian classical tradition is judged by its ability to stimulate *rasa* in the viewer. *Rasa*, literally meaning juice, relates to metaphors of cooking and the pleasures of consuming a perfectly balanced mix of emotional elements, which invoke pleasure, satisfy desire and leave the spectator with a pervading sense of contentment. Narrative content and theme, however, are secondary to the production of *rasa*; Ram makes the crucial observation that while the storyline of a Bharatanatyam item may refer to the emotional life of a character, the poetics of traditional Indian dance and theatre forms operate even in abstract, non-lyrical segments of *nrtta*, *jathi*⁴⁶ and *swara*⁴⁷. The dancer's mastery of footwork, bodily movement, facial expression, and music, work together not just to index emotional qualities as narrative would do, rather, they actively *produce* them. To say that *kritis* and *varnams* (songs) of Bharatanatyam are rendered in the mode of *bhakti* (devotion) or *adbhudta* (wonder), is to say that the performance is designed to *produce* these sensations in the spectator rather than simply dramatize them. The caveat here is that this level of efficacy can only be sustained by mastery of technique and a harmonious blend of all its various elements, material and performative (Ram, 269).

⁴⁶ *Jathis* are non-linguistic syllables vocalized onomatopically to the sound of corresponding footwork Eg. *Tha-ki-ta, tha-ka-di-mi, etc.* See Ram, (268).

⁴⁷ *Swaras* are Indian musical notation—sa re ga ma, etc— sung as melody, without lyrics.

As a masterful navigator of the Bharatanatyam assemblage, Bhaskar crafts intricate and expertly crafted *jathis* interspersed with moving segments of *abhinaya* (histrionic enactment) spoken word, that predominantly elicit *karuna* (compassion), *adbhuta* (wonder), *vīra* (courage) and *shānta* (peace) rasas. Following the ādi-Buddha *varnam*, Anweshana features a shorter work that poetically reimagines the mythical and iconographic gender switch of the male bodhisattva *Avalokitesvara* into the female bodhisattva *Kuan Yin*, patron deity of merchants and sailors in navigating perilous sea-routes, as Mahayana Buddhism circulated across the terrestrial and maritime Silk Road in the first millennium of the common era. The third piece depicts and is dedicated to the female *bodhisattva Tara*, as having many forms, in many colors, to aid devotees within different environs. Finally, the production also dramatizes the westward journeys of the Chinese monks Xuanzang (7th century CE) and Faxian (9th century), as musical and comedic interludes centralizing the monks' arduous and legendary journeys to the west, to seek and translate authentic Buddhist texts from Sanskrit and Pali into Chinese languages for the imperial court.

Choreographic reassembly makes all these identifications efficacious by aligning these narratives with analogues from traditional representations of Hindu gods and mythic characters in Bharatanatyam. These include a transposal of elements used to depict *Ardhanaarishwara*⁴⁸—or the amalgamated body of Shiva and his female consort *Shakti*—to present the bodhisattva *Avalokitesvara* as gender fluid. Bhaskar maps conventions of *devi padams*, which describe the exploits of various Hindu goddesses, most notably the mother goddess as *Ambal* or *Shakti* to stage Bodhisattva Tara. Xuenzang and Faxian's adventure tales are dramatized in the same manner as those of various heroes in episodes of the Indian epics, the Mahabharata and Ramayana. Carnatic vocalist and composer Ampili Pradeep sets Bhaskar's Tamil and Sanskrit lyrics to *rakhti ragas*, literally "blood-like" ragas, to produce a viscerally scintillating choreography that bleeds with emotion.

Given this understanding Indian classical dance as an assemblage of techniques aimed at producing affect, it is clear that choreographers in diverse socio-cultural formations can choose to exercise these techniques towards different ends. Indeed, Bharatanatyam choreographers in other locales have experimented to incorporate non-Hindu religious themes, with New Jersey based choreographer Francis Barboza even working with Biblical stories. More recently celebrated Indian dancers like the New-Delhi based Rama Vaidyanathan in *Vivartana*, 2018 and the Chennai/ Los Angeles-based Mythili Prakash in *Jwala*, 2016, have incorporated Sufi poetry into their work while continuing to be received by publics and presenters as traditional dancers. Yet these impulses are tailored to enliven local Indian communities in Indian and global sites; therefore, they are not necessarily transnational in its choreographic identifications, as *Anweshana* evidently is. The subject matter and symbolism that Bhaskar deploys in *Anweshana* are fundamentally concerned with staging pre-modern transnational flows. Another closely related instance of choreographic reassembly is evident in the works of Subramaniam, as mentioned in the introductory segment of this chapter. Subramaniam offers a marvellous perspective of contemporary Bharatanatyam as part of the long lineage of bardic traditions in India, which have transitioned from animating sacred and secular themes in line with the religious denominations of different civilizations. Subramaniam identifies that famous theatrical works in the Tamil tradition – *Silappadikaram* (date contested, likely 3rd-5th century CE) and

⁴⁸ Literal translation: the lord who's left half is woman.

Manimekalai (circa 6th century) best known among them—feature Buddhist kings, characters and themes. Such historical instantiations of fungible application of dance technique within the Indian context points to the inherent flexibility of the Indian temple and court performance traditions.

I therefore consider choreographic reassembly as latent in the Bharatanatyam form itself and as many Indian dance scholars have suggested, its affiliations with an imagined ‘authentic’, ancient Hindu past as an anomalous disruption caused by the disruptions of colonial and postcolonial nationalism. In Singapore, choreographic reassembly is also articulated by the hyphenated nature of Singaporean cultural citizenship, the Southeast Asian context of practice and the global aspirations of the Singaporean creative/cultural bureaucracy.

Southeast Asian Inflections in Singapore-made Bharatanatyam

As part of the costuming decisions made around the piece *Tara* in *Anweshana*, Bhaskar adds a gilt-paper headdress with strung tassels that emulate the elaborate those used in Javanese and Balinese dance. This, she concluded, would effectively prevent any equation of *Tara* with the many depictions of Indian goddesses. This rather facile addition signals the transnational, Southeast Asian distinction to Singapore-made Bharatanatyam. Bharatanatyam dancer Priyadarshini Govind, who worked with Singapore based Indian dance company Apsaras Arts in 2013 to create *Angkor, the Untold story*, makes a similar move. As a production that is concerned with *Devatas*, divine female figures depicted on one section of the Angkor Wat complex. Govind uses dance-as-choreographic reassembly as Bhaskar does in *Anweshana*, to research the identity of the devata and juxtapose the worlds of the Khmer temple with that of the *devadasis*, who are also women often depicted in the stone sculptures of Indian temple walls. Other recent Singaporean Bharatanatyam productions have featured stories of significant Buddhist monuments around the world. Under Aravinth Kumaraswamy’s artistic direction at Apsaras Arts, *Anjasa* also betrays similar, minor mutations in Bharatanatyam costume, dance technique and staging conventions in order to highlight their diegetic position outside of the territorial and discursive space of India and its Hindu cosmos. *Anjasa*, which means path or road, uses Bharatanatyam to describe the *sthalapuranas* or place-myths of various Buddhist sites, including Lumbini in Nepal, Bodh Gaya in India, Borobodur in Indonesia and the Bayon temple at the Angkor Wat, Cambodia. Like *Anweshana*, this work is also a project of choreographic reassembly, reworking Bharatanatyam to stage precolonial transnational circulations of Buddhism. Unlike *Anweshana* however, *Angkor* and *Anjasa* are not supported by Singaporean Buddhist diplomacy projects. Rather choreographers of these works have taken on Buddhist themes as a way to display their innovative capacities in expanding Bharatanatyam’s artistic possibilities, as well as its audiences transnationally across the Asia-Pacific. Yet what explains the persistence of Buddhist themes in Bharatanatyam even as Buddhist diplomatic projects themselves receded from the Singaporean public sphere? Are we seeing a religious turn in Singapore’s Bharatanatyam dancing communities or are these choreographers merely responding to opportunities in their national context?



Fig. 6 “Tara” staged for *Anweshana: The Search for Nalanda* at the University Culture Center in March 2011. Source: NUS Centre For the Arts

The answer lies in a clear articulation of the space in which Singaporean-dancers conceive of and create their work. Singaporean Indian Bharatanatyam is a space of interaction between diasporic and transnational Indian choreographers, that is, local Indians who have been part of the Singapore story for generations, and more recent economic migrants who shuttle between Singapore, India and elsewhere. As immigration from India to Singapore has sharply increased in the first two decades of the 21st century⁴⁹, the realm of creative practice has stimulated the reflexive evaluation among local diasporic Indian practitioners as to what is so Singaporean about their Singaporean Indian identity. Since Singapore’s postcolonial nationhood in 1965, its Indian diaspora much like their Chinese and Malay counterparts, have espoused a hyphenated identity, as Singaporean-Indians. The stakes of Singaporean national and cultural citizenship therefore demands that all these participants identify flexibly with Singaporean and Indian cultural regimes, the former valorizing urban, Asian and pragmatic dispositions, while the

⁴⁹ Between 1990 and 2012, the number of Indians in Singapore shot from 194,000 to 351,000, which is over a 60% increase that is largely accounted to immigration from India. See *Monthly Digest of Statistics Singapore* under works cited.

latter grants Singaporean Indian subjects a degree of civilizational prestige within the unequal hierarchies of race in Singapore that positions Indians at the very bottom as descendants of coolies, convicts and plantation laborers. As I argue in Chapter 1 the minimization of practices like *Theemithi* (fire walking) and *Taipuṣam* (annual festival celebrating the deity *Murugan*), have led to Bharatanatyam, emerging as a representative practice of the Indian community among others⁵⁰, rehearsing and staging a consolidated, high cultural identity acceptable across the ethnic communities that are lumped as “Indian” in Singaporean demographic rubrics. Departures from mainstream themes, even as Singapore-made Bharatanatyam remains within the frame of tradition indicates a lapsing of this trend, and a rise in confidence of local practitioners to identify outside of their Indian cultural roots on stage.

Moreover, as early 21st century Singaporean arts policy rewards experimentation. The telos of the Singaporean creative industries¹¹ is to seed a Singaporean Renaissance, with artists taking the lead as ‘Renaissance Singaporeans’. This discourse was crystallized with the *Renaissance City Report* in 2000, which sought to construct the “Renaissance Singaporean” as: “an individual with an open, analytical and creative mind that is capable of acquiring, sharing, applying and creating new knowledge (while) attuned to his Asian roots and heritage. (He) has a strong sense of identity and belonging to his community and nation (that) gives him confidence to pursue activities beyond our shores...” (Renaissance City Report 2000: 39, qtd.in. Chong, 44).

I discuss neoliberal strategies in shaping culture further in chapter 3 of this dissertation. Beyond mere bureaucratic discourse, these objectives have been crystallized in the form of thematic guidelines in grant frameworks and calls for performance proposals made by arts and culture institutions funded directly or indirectly by the state. The NUS CFA is one of them, as is the Esplanade Singapore, the latter producing the annual Indian arts festival *Kalaa Utsavam* and various other platforms that artists rely upon annually to finance their creative ventures. Moreover, Singaporean regulatory regimes make it impossible for artists to work without state funding. As Indian choreographer Raka Maitra states, in Singapore art is a luxury high rental rates for practice studios and performance spaces and the high cost of production of theatrical work, creates a situation where artists must seek state funding to remain solvent. The state in turn, directs their creative energies to resolve socio-culture problems posed in the form of grant frameworks.

Creativity in Neoliberal Time: Artistic Intuition meets the Problem-Solving Mindset

Artists like Santha Bhaskar, who have successfully navigated this transformation, report a shift in how they work, as they respond to the demands of what can be called an ‘audit culture’ (Strathern). While in the past, an annual showcase and a touring season might have shaped their yearly calendar, the work and temporality of dance-making is now organized in accordance with institutional and festival platforms and is punctuated by the production deadlines set by these platforms. Cultural bureaucratic structures in place in Singapore therefore closely regulate creativity itself, as the aspirations of the

⁵⁰ Cultural practices and products from India, including Indian classical performing arts, Saivaite-*agamic* ritual practices in temples, popular Tamil film and music and South Indian fashion trends, are also patronized by Tamil-speaking Singaporean Indians. For more, see Sinha 2011 and Sinha 2015.

Indian choreographers are attuned to the rhythms of funding cycles and calls for production. Singaporean choreographers' work of making Bharatanatyam fungible with Asianness is also related to the contingencies produced within audit culture to render creative, cultural work amenable to corporate labor schedules. Creativity thus becomes overdetermined as a problem-solving skill and an exercise of evolving within a shifting arts ecology. I offer a simple example that illustrates the link between artistic intuition, industrial schedules of creativity and bureaucratic interventions into the theme and content of choreographic work.

In the fall of 2009, I was one of Santha Bhaskar's numerous student-dancers, dancing in several of her concert dance productions with NUS Indian Dance, the Indian dance company she founded in 1977, under the umbrella of the NUS CFA. We were in the midst of finalizing our proposal for the aforementioned NUS Arts Festival 2010 which was organized around the theme "Asia Now." Our existing proposal – a mix of Wayang Kulit puppetry and Cambodian dance alongside Bharatanatyam—had not met the cut. The NUS CFA programs team felt that the proposal did not pin down the answer to the question posed by the festival's production call – what was "Asia Now"? We had been scrambling for ideas for a few weeks when Bhaskar upturned the entire working-proposal perilously close to the deadline. She had suddenly remembered an exhibition called *On the Nalanda Trail* that she had seen two years prior, in 2007 at Singapore's the Asian Civilizations Museum. The exhibition, she remembered, included several exquisite figurines of Buddha and the Bodhisattvas from all over Asia, carved into elegant poses that closely resemble those used in Bharatanatyam. She suggested that we create a work that could investigate these correspondences and subsequently, *Anweshana*, which literally translates to 'research' or 'inquiry' in Sanskrit, was born. Bhaskar's artistic intuition worked within the contingency of the grant deadline to make links between different domains of knowledge – history, religion, international relations and the south Indian performing arts – to resolve the problem posed—that of defining "what was Asia now", by considering what was Asia, then.

Singapore's Indian choreographers are similarly subject to the limitations and opportunities suspended by its creative industries. Embedded within them, other Bharatanatyam choreographers, notably those affiliated with Apsara's Arts Singapore, have turned towards Buddhism and medieval Southeast Asian art history more broadly, as resources for creative experimentation. *Anjasa* is a good example of this, as is *Alapadma: The Lotus Unfolds* (2015), which considers the lotus motif in art and architecture across India, Southeast and West Asia, and *Anjaneya: Hanuman's Ramayana* which considers the Indian epic Ramayana from the syncretic, Indonesian worldview. As an energetic transcultural figure, Kumaraswamy has also successfully positioned Singaporean Bharatanatyam, with its Buddhist and Southeast Asian offerings, as legitimate works of traditional Bharatanatyam dance on the global stage, regardless of the contemporary and experimental processes that constitute them. *Anjasa* in fact toured India in December 2019 and was selected as a prominent feature of the annual Natyakala conference in Chennai, India, one of the most significant yearly events on the global Bharatanatyam calendar. Singaporean calculations around cultural production and creative work are evidently yielding positive results for its choreographers.

Dancing in Emptiness

What remains of Bharatanatyam as a dance and the Bharatanatyam dancer in the midst of these governmental operations? Again, I return to *Anweshana* and consider Santha Bhaskar's

choreographic response to this question. *Anweshana* is book-ended by short abstract segments featuring a minor *dakini*— as female demi-goddesses are known in Buddhism— called Nairatmya. At the close of the video montage, animated text projects an image of this lithe, blue Buddhist goddess, conceived to be eternally dancing in the vast emptiness of space, signifying the Buddhist notion of *shunyata*, or the inherent emptiness of reality.



Fig 7. Dancer Shivashini Kummar as Nairatmya in *Anweshana: The Search for Nalanda* at the University Culture Center in March 2011. Source: NUS Centre For the Arts

This stunning image of Nairatmya, sourced from a 16th century Tibetan Tankha, depicted her with royal blue skin, a crown of crow feathers, dancing in a sapphire blue sky, amidst the burning, red flames of ignorance [Fig 7]. In her hand, she holds the vajra and the bell, signifying the diamantine and startling nature of enlightenment that pierces through non-awareness (Shaw, 2006, 387). The deep blackness of the unlit stage then lifts to reveal a female dancer, Shivashni Kummar, who performs as Nairatmya in a royal blue and black sari, with the Bharatanatyam bells tied around her feet. Dancing to the rich, melodic twang of the *veena* (Indian lute) and the *pullankuzhal* (South Indian bamboo flute), Shivashni as *Nairatmya* dances in the *tandava* mode, dissolving *maya* the illusion of this material universe and revealing the truth of emptiness that underpins reality. The *tandava*, emphasizing strength, speed, and fire of masculine virility, is commonly affiliated with the blue god Shiva, worshipped in South India as Nataraja, the lord, patron deity and progenitor of all Indian classical dances. Shiva's absence and displacement by

Nairatyma can be understood as choreographic reassembly, yet this is one transposal that makes a marked commentary about its effects on the soul of Bharatanatyam in Singapore.

Since the early twentieth century, Shiva-Nataraja has arguably functioned as a “gate keeping construction of India, a metonym for an entire colonial and Indian nationalist imaginary” (Ram, 2000, 265). Popular—and orientalist—explications of Nataraja’s iconography are nearly identical to Nairatyma’s; dancing at the center of the universe, the lord of dance sets the rhythm of the cosmos and destroys all illusion that ensnares the souls of men (Coomaraswamy, 1974, 93). Saskia Kersenboom, however, goes into great detail about Nataraja’s iconography and lore within its particular milieu of medieval Southern India which is a far cry from what orientalist abstractions would suggest. In Tamil poetry, often depicted in Bharatanatyam dance, Nataraja is depicted as dancing not in the center of the universe, but in the environs of the Chidambaram temple in Tamil Nadu. His dance there is called the *Ananda Tandava* (dance of bliss) and it is this dance that is frozen in the popular stone image of Nataraja. The story affiliated with it charts the god’s own journey of forgetfulness and memory. In this story Shiva’s extreme penance causes him to forget his identity and he wanders as the mendicant-beggar *Bhikshasana*, until events transpire that arouse him to dance. In dancing, his identity reemerges as it rekindles memories of his beloved, goddess Parvati or Shakti, with whom he dances the *Ananda Tandava*. In this fable, dance, specifically Nataraja’s dance, is characterized as being mnemonic in nature, awakening the dancer to their identity. The identity resuscitated and secured in dance is grounded not in emptiness, but in desire and memory. Dance also has an object, which is loving submergence with *shakti* or the divine life force (Kersenboom, “Ananda’s Tandava” 39).

I take this detour to describe Nataraja’s iconography and its mythic affiliations to make the connection between Bharatanatyam, memory and identity. Anthropologist Kalpana Ram also makes these links in discussing the value of Indian classical performing arts in the Indian migrant experience. The material and performative assemblage of these forms, Ram argues, produces a particular orientation toward the past, be it as lived experience for transnational, globally mobile Indian subjects, or as a more remote civilizational resource for Indian diaspora. The past can be accessed a series of representations in the act of dancing and watching dance (Ram, 267). This argument is substantiated by the pervasive and consistent presence of Bharatanatyam dance practice in immigrant and diasporic Indian communities globally, where young Indians (predominantly girls) are schooled in the Indian performing arts as a way to unconsciously imbue the bodily comportments, rhythmic and musical patterns and social hierarchies that simulate an embodied experience of Indian values. This situation, replicated across the world, is practiced as a way of acquiring Indian culture as physical memory, which may be accessed in performance.

Singaporean reassembly of classical Indian dance preserves some of these features but empties the content of diasporic memory and its relationship to the past, transforming Bharatanatyam into a set of techniques that can be used by practitioners to construct Singaporean futures. As creativity is reframed as an exercise in problem solving, the artistic intuition and skill of Bharatanatyam dancers are called away from its primary task of sustaining and regenerating communities of imagination and practice for Singapore’s Indians. Instead, different tasks emerge. In the case of productions like *Anjasa* and *Ankgor*, the problem posed by the city-state’s institutional ecology is the infusion of its existing cultural practices – like Bharatanatyam – with global values. Ideally then, Singaporean Bharatanatyam, unlike its Indian counterpart, would be able to command audiences beyond people of Indian origin, and can circulate profitably in the many Asian cultural metropolises around Singapore. In Anweshana’s case, a related problem is

posed—to make Indian dance and by extension, Singaporean multiracialism, work in service of the city-state’s ambitions to remain pivotal in east-west Asian diplomatic relations. *Anweshana* thus extends Bharatanatyam’s civilizational associations beyond the Indian national context, as the figure of the dancer becomes a surface upon which the Buddhist monk, various Buddhist deities and the Buddha himself, may be projected allowing varied national and cultural identifications. In the process, choreographer Santha Bhaskar offers new ways to think through notions of choreography as reassembly, creativity as a mix of intuitionism and problem solving, as Singaporean-Indian subjectivity is emptied to accommodate the exigencies of neoliberal pragmatism.

Chapter 3: Anticipatory Traditionalism

In the self-styled “Renaissance City” of Singapore, traditional dancers of Indian and Malay styles find themselves marked as traditionalists and hence outside of the discourses salient to the region’s burgeoning field of contemporary arts. In this chapter I focus on how artists from traditional Indian and Malay dance lineages play with temporality through choreographic reassembly, slipping between past, present and future frames, in a move I call “anticipatory traditionalism”. This chapter features artists who work with formal and aesthetic features and historical narratives linked with their respective forms, pulled from various eras, to create a temporal tumble in which traditional pasts are repurposed to embody possible futures for culturally composite, twenty-first century Asian identities. I focus on one Indian and two Malay choreographers, at *Chowk Productions*, *Bhumi Collective* and *P7:IMA*, who create work in a predictive mode, in anticipation of what will qualify either within traditional arts funding frameworks, or those of Asian contemporary dance. No longer invested in linking the ancient past to perpetuity, they instead intuit the near future of culture in Singapore. As suggested in the introduction to this dissertation, tradition has related and competing meanings in contemporary Asia – firstly, as forms of knowledge, practice and social relations and secondly as a genre of performing art. This chapter opens with three instances of traditional dance in contemporary Singapore unfolding along three distinct lines of thought.

In 1982, ritual *nadaswaram* player and Tamil temple musician T. Nagasaundaram was quoted as saying, “*marappu marudal alla*” (tradition is not, but also *not* not change)—a pithy but powerful assertion in the Tamil language about what *marappu* or tradition is. The sentence is complicated by the use of the verb *alla* (Tamil for “to be different”) that implies that tradition is different from change. Tradition is not, but also *not* not change, but a form of continuity that is enacted by change (Kersenboom, “Ritual Differs” 311). In other words, the *marapu* or tradition of *sadir*, a Tamil temple and court form that is considered precursor to Bharatanatyam, is flexible. On a hot June evening in 2019, Aniruddha Knight, grandson of the famous, 20th century Bharatanatyam dancer T. Balasaraswati, tries to demonstrate Singaporean audiences that *ma⁵¹rappu* as distinct from generic understandings of tradition as that which resists change. At a modestly sized audience gathered at the SIFAS¹ outdoor auditorium on Starlight Road, in Singapore’s “Little India” district, Knight’s music ensemble and his young students⁵² give a “lecture-demonstration”—the term used in the dance world in which choreographer/dancers lecture on and demonstrate aspects of performance as research. The lecture demonstration is part of the Dance-India Asia Pacific⁵³ conference, an annual gathering organized by Apsaras Arts Singapore

⁵¹ Singapore India Fine Arts Association is commonly shortened as SIFAS.

⁵² On the *mridangam* was Adyar Gopinath, who is from the same family as Adyar Lakshman. Ranjini Gopal Menon, who was one of the fortunate few trained by T. Balasaraswati herself, set the beat on the *nattuvangam*. T.R. Murthy, who played the flute, and Usha Shivakumar who colored the evening with her rich vocals, both worked closely with, or trained under T. Balasaraswati and her brother, T. Vishwanathan, or, as in Smt. Usha’s case, with Balasaraswati’s daughter Lakshmi Knight. Aniruddha Knight’s senior students, Maharani Parisamuthu and Abinaya Senthil demonstrated the dance segments.

⁵³ *Dance India Asia Pacific* was once the Singapore chapter of *Dance India* started by the Manchester-based, British-Indian cultural organization *Milapfest*. Apsaras Arts Singapore seem to have relinquished since this collaboration.

funded by the Singapore National Arts Council. The conference is aimed primarily at semi-professionals and serious students of Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Odissi from Singapore, Malaysia and Australia, who pay a sizeable fee for week-long masterclasses with classical dancers from India and elsewhere.

Student-dancers Maharani Parisamuthu and Abinaya Senthil demonstrate powerful, intricate dancing and also occasional singing, interspersed by Knight's commentary, who elaborates that in the *paramparai* or lineage of *sadir* and other south Indian classical music and dance espoused by the *Isai Vellalar* community⁵⁴, dance was composed and flexibly adapted in different circumstances of performances. Older pieces largely rooted in the 18th century Thanjavur court remained mainstay of the temple-dancing tradition though he explains, new pieces were regularly composed well into the post-colonial era. A selection of *adavus* or technical exercises demonstrated by the dancers exhibited a nimbleness and speed that contradicts the oft-repeated oral history in the classical Indian dance community that pre-revival temple dance lacked technique or refinement. Knight points out that there was no standard set of technique exercises or *adavus* which forms the basic training for Bharatanatyam dancers today among *sadir* practitioners. *Nattuvanars* rather designed and set *adavus* for training particular dancers based on their physical abilities and limitations. A set of about 115 *meyyadavus* and *poyyadavus*—the prefix “mey” implying and “poy” attached to the noun *adavu* or “step”, implying different kinds of body conditioning goals—were set by *Nattuvanar* Kandappa Pillai for T. Balasaraswati and has been passed down to her students who today practice and teach the Balasaraswati “school” of Bharatanatyam. Knight and his ensemble therefore demonstrate T. Nagasaundaram's perspective on *marappu* or tradition in the native context of performance for Singapore's dance community.

At another conference, *The First International Conference on Continuity and Change in Indian Classical Dance* (Aug 3-4, 2012), co-hosted by the Singapore National Arts Council and Raka Maitra's Chowk Productions in 2012, famous Odissi dancer, Sujata Mohapatra offers another view of tradition – as that which must be protected from change. Mohapatra recounts an incident with disdain; she came across a young London-based dancer reworking the *Kirwani Pallavi*, originally choreographed by her teacher, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. “At least if it had been good,” says Mohapatra, “I could have told her that okay, you have done it, but you have done a mistake. But this was so bad, I couldn't say anything.” Interesting here is the veteran artist's implied assertion that the fundamental mistake is not that this dancer was a poor choreographer or performer, it was that she had dared to tamper with an existing classical piece created by the guru. In this view, the repertoire of Indian classical dance, largely set in the 20th century, is sacrosanct and thus to be preserved without the corrupting influence of innovation. Knight's lec-dem and the flexibility in pedagogy and performance demonstrated by his students therefore counter the orthodoxies of Indian classical dance that circulate widely in the global Indian classical dance community.

Just a year prior to Aniruddha Knight's showcase in Singapore, another set of traditional artists perform a spoof of ‘tradition’ in Singapore. In a dark room of a refurbished house built in

⁵⁴ A majority of practicing Indian classical dancers rarely come across critical, scholarship on the Indian classical dances or histories of the *Isai-Vellalar* community of performing artists and criminalization of this community's *devadasi murai* – the temple dancer's right to perform. Till very recently, a narrative of immorality of traditional temple and court dancers and the corruption of an authentic, ancient dance form circulated discursively as truth in Indian classical dance classrooms.

the colonial era, Malay dancer “Soutari” Amin Farid and Nget Rady, an exponent of Cambodian traditional dance form, *Lakhaon Kaol*, do a choreographed segment that appears to be a duel— a confrontation between two warriors performing the prowess of their tribe as embodied powerfully and beautifully in their respective martial art forms. Farid is dressed in a dark gray suit and moves swiftly and gracefully in a low, bent knee stance. Behind him is a backdrop made of black and white, A4 size papers pasted in neat lines across the length and breadth of the wall. His movements are recognizable as “Malay” traditional dance, with outward facing palms and taut fingers. He makes powerful, fluid movements across the room in a mid-level crouch. With thighs pressed against each other and knees closed, his arms and wrists make large arcs and arabesques over and across his body. His movements are graceful and controlled— a warrior’s dance. As the dance gathers momentum, the white papers, tacked only along the top margins, flutter gently, in staggered, papery sighs. Quietly and without preamble, phrases begin to appear and disappear on the backdrop of white papers projected in glowing black letters, one after the other:

“Inspire our Government”
 “Inspire our people”
 “Inspire the region”
 “Inspire our cultural orphans”
 “Inspire our University of Culture”
 “Position Singapore Globally”
 “Position Singapore Universally”
 “Position Singapore...
 ...Practically...Productively...
 ...Positively... Passionately... Exotically”

This does not last, however, as their duel—or duet— gathers momentum, Rady breaks out of the duel to do a splendid impersonation of a trapped monkey in the *Lakhaon Kaol* idiom. The monkey, frenetic, as if being pursued, violently collides against the doors of the performance space, ricochets off the walls and careens dangerously close to the audience. He stops short of the white-paper backdrop, letting out a piercing scream. Slowly, as if hanging by a rope, Rady pulls at his collar until his neck droops over his chest, chin over collar bone. The slogans on the back wall continue to beam in and out silently, placidly, and without interruption.

Insiders to the Singapore arts scene will clearly recognize the projected phrases in the above performance as vision statements, solicited within the first two lines of grant applications by the Singapore National Arts Council. The wall of whitepapers is a nod to the policy papers that circulate from the highest offices of the state to its subsidiary bodies, establishing and shaping the normative direction of cultural production in Singapore. This humorous, if excessively literal and self-conscious satire was part of a performance titled *Journey to Nowhere* in the “Southernmost” theatre festival by Center 42 Singapore, on 10 and 11 November 2018⁵⁵.

⁵⁵ *Journey to nowhere* was directed by Singapore based experimental theatre practitioner Liu Xiaoyi of *Emergency Stairs*, and curator of the *Southernmost: One Table Two Chairs Project* arts festival. The performance was the collaborative effort between seven traditional and experimental artists from the region— Chinese Flute practitioner Andi Chia (Singapore), Javanese dance artist Didik Nini Thowok (Indonesia), Chinese *Liuqin* and *Ruan* instrumental musician Eee Vian Loi (Singapore), Chinese dancer Elizabeth Chan (Singapore), Noh Theatre master Kanji Shimizu (Japan), Cambodian *Lakhaon Khaol* dancer Nget Rady (Cambodia) and r Muhammad Norman Bin Muhamed Farid aka “Soutari” Farid (Singapore).

In this segment, Muhammad Noramin Bin Farid or “Soultari” Farid as he prefers to call himself, and Cambodian dancer Nget Rady, stage the pressures of “performing tradition” under the imperatives of the state’s creative economic policies for the arts today. Here, two related but distinct lineages of Southeast Asian traditional dance face-off against each other — in conversation but also in combat, out of context and as edutainment for a culturally non-specific audience. They stage the loss of social position of traditional dancers as leaders of their communities and guardians of their cultural lineage. Here, the “white-paper”, bureaucratese that has slipped into common parlance, signifies the surreptitious pressures laid upon the traditional arts in Singapore, now considered an official sector for development, as they are beset with multiple targets— representation of ethnicity, community development and market success— within three-to-five-year funding cycles.

The piece above, *Journey to Nowhere*, draws its title from the sixteenth-century Chinese novel *Journey to the West* attributed to Ming dynasty author Wu Cheng’en. The novel is widely considered a classic and its enduring popularity has also ensured that the Tang dynasty monk Xuanzang and his journey from China to India in search of Buddhist scripture is well-remembered globally—this journey was also showcased in the work *Anweshana* discussed in Chapter 2. Segments of this novel feature a “monkey-king”; *Journey to Nowhere*, however references the monkey in exemplifying the kind of “monkey dance” which traditional dancers are subject to when traditional dance is understood just as a genre, and dancers are expected to dance to the tune of Singapore’s global aspirations. Contrasting views of tradition within the traditional dance community – tradition as flexible as demonstrated by Aniruddha Knight or tradition as a preserve of authentic, pure pasts as held by the mainstream, Indian classical dance community—are both circumscribed by globalized cultural flows, governmental forces, technological interventions and tight economic terms, force artists into a position of acute self-reflexivity. This chapter presents a selection of Malay and Indian dance practitioners in Singapore who call out the paradoxes of performing tradition, while etching positions as contemporary dance-makers. Specifically, this chapter how experiments in traditional dance in Singapore anticipates the future of tradition.

Enlightenment as Cultural Policy

It was in the late 1990s that neoliberal doctrines began to shape cultural policy in Singapore, shifting the rhetorical tone of cultural management from “Asian modernity” to the “Asian Renaissance”. This shift aligned with efforts in domains of education, immigration, infrastructure development and city planning to transform Singapore, both in image and in actuality, from the puritanically modern East Asian city-state, into a knowledge hub— a “baroque or complex ecology”, of “diverse, global, elements— knowledge, practices and actors— interacting at a high level of performance” (A. Ong “Neoliberalism” 180). Economic objectives of attracting global talent in financial, technological and bioscience sectors to resettle in Singapore necessitated long overdue attention to culture as an area for development. To compete with other global sites of knowledge, culture and capital such as London, Hong Kong and New York, Singapore would have to reinvent itself as a “Global City for the Arts” as recommended jointly by Singapore’s Economic Development Board and The Ministry of Information and the Arts in 1992 (Chong 36). Strategic direction for the arts specifically was

crystallized in the Renaissance City Report in 2000, a policy whitepaper produced by the Ministry of Information and The Arts (MITA), which articulated a clear mandate for the arts within future imaginaries of Singapore as a world-class city supported by a vibrant cultural scene, (“Renaissance City Report,” 4). The report goes on to create a vision for a future “Renaissance Singapore” as such:

“This will be a society that encourages experimentation and innovation, whether it be in culture and the arts, or in technology, the sciences and education. To dare to fail would be a mantra of success, for only through continuous experimentation can a viable synthesis of experience and effort come to fruition.” (Chong 38)

Accompanying this shift, state discourse of the early 2000s shifted to imagine a radically transformed subjectivity for Singaporeans of the Renaissance city. As fears of western decadence that motivated discourses of Singaporean neo-traditional modernity in the twentieth century (Wee, “Capitalism and ethnicity” 136-139) are replaced by the drive to artificially incite the effects of the European Renaissance, the future of Singapore’s little traditions and the ethical valuations embedded in them are called into question. Aihwa Ong suggests that the dispositions of entrepreneurship, critical thinking, risk-friendliness and creativity were now sought to be inculcated *in addition* to dedication, industriousness, and loyalty to nation and community that were prized values in the 20th century narrative of nation (“Neoliberalism” 190). The arts would hence cultivate the “Renaissance Man”, an imagined figure from seventeenth century Europe, defined as such: “an individual imbued with an inquiring mind, an adventurous spirit and wide-ranging abilities” (“Renaissance City” 38).

While “Renaissance” metaphors are imported from Euro-western thought, Singaporean bureaucratic imagination reassembles and localizes this imaginary with Asian elements. To be Asian, is to navigate a sense of civic responsibility and duty while remaining free-thinking and enterprising. As invoked in Chapter 2, the Renaissance City Report describes the Renaissance Singaporean as:

“An individual with an open, analytical and creative mind that is capable of acquiring, sharing, applying and creating new knowledge (while remaining) attuned to his Asian roots and heritage. (He) has a strong sense of identity and belonging to his community and nation (that) gives him the confidence to pursue activities beyond our shores.... [he is] an active citizen who understands the balance between rights and responsibilities. He has a healthy regard for fellow men, respects common property and is willing to make sacrifices for the greater good and to help those less fortunate than himself.”

(Chong 44)

The idea was that a flourishing arts scene would encourage Singaporeans to think in lateral, creative ways. The Singaporean Renaissance also aimed at softening the country’s image as both the epitome and a caricature of modern Asian despotism: in 1993, science fiction writer William Gibson famously declared Singapore as “Disneyland with a Death Penalty”. Much like the performance of Indian tradition detailed in Chapters 1 and 2, the Renaissance imaginary and performance is oriented both inward and outward, toward citizens as well as to cosmopolitan visitors and to highly skilled foreign talent, with the hope that some of the latter will be induced to naturalize into citizens (Chong 36-37).

Evolving into a city of vibrant, unusual people and experiences, Renaissance Singapore reorganizes citizen performance on stage as much as in knowledge and financial industries. As a result, large influxes of public funding have been redirected into the arts. Today generous grants and presenting platforms nurture a pool of creative talent and a dynamic arts field that is steadily growing in scale and quality. Beginning with the setting up of the National Arts Council in 1992, the Creative Industries became a formalized economic sector, overseen and managed by the state with a firm, and sometimes contriving, hand. By 2002, an Economic Review Committee ushered in the Creative Industries as a formal sector for state regulation and economic development, with the arts, along with media and design sectors, as focal points to transform Singapore into a creative city (“Economic Review” iii). Funding initiatives peaked in 2003 at S\$529 million (U.S.\$302 million) for artistic creation, as well as for long-term infrastructural projects that have now dotted Singapore’s landscape with museums, libraries and performing arts centers (Wee “Creating High Culture” 93). “The crowning infrastructural achievement,” Wee reports, “was the October 2002 opening of the S\$600 million (U.S.\$345 million) *Esplanade—Theaters on the Bay* arts complex, built specifically for “world-class” foreign acts” (*ibid*, 87). Since this initial flush, state support for the arts, culture and heritage sectors have remained fairly steady— at nearly S\$412 million (U.S.\$ 301 million) disbursed in the 2016 financial year alone (“Our SG Arts plan” 69). Though only a sliver of this amount, in the ballpark of about S\$16 million (U.S.\$ 11.6 million) a year is channeled to supporting performing and literary arts companies annually via the Singapore National Arts Council (NAC), this includes 47 Major Companies and 11 Seed Grant Companies—subsuming the entire sector of the performing and literary arts under state support (“Major Company Scheme” 2016).

Sustaining the cultural relevance and economic viability of the traditional arts has been taken up formally by the *Traditional Arts Secretariat* within the NAC in 2011, with a slim total of \$23 million, provided under a five-year (and later extended) National Traditional Arts Plan “dedicated to improving the quality of productions, growing potential peak companies as well as increasing audience base and accessibility to the art form(s)” (“New Initiatives”). Tradition hence appears to the state as a challenge that must be solved by a series of choices and decisions concerning aesthetics, politics and economics. Policy white papers are explicit in harnessing tradition and its forms, as fragments from which novel Singaporean cultural products may emerge:

“...the best of Singapore’s cultural offerings are contemporary yet Asian and speaks to our common humanity. Of international quality, these works will appeal to discerning partners. The innovative use of traditional elements may further add to the distinctiveness of Singapore-made work...”

(“Our SG Arts” 29)

Traditional Arts funding, like all state-funding for the arts in Singapore, is indispensable, competitive and conditional. The traditional Malay and Indian dancers presented in the latter half of this paper are entirely supported by funding and presentation platforms; in the new business environment for creative workers in Singapore, proceeds from teaching and performing dance are insufficient to cover expensive rental costs for rehearsal and performance, publicity and marketing, and sustaining salaries for skilled employees – artists, administrators and teachers. It is not an exaggeration to say that all major and minor performing arts-making concerns of music, dance and theatre— are supported by government schemes that cover anywhere between 30-70% of total operating costs. As real estate costs in Singapore have skyrocketed since the 2000s, arts

companies vie for subsidized rentals under the NAC's arts-housing schemes⁵⁶. Though state funding terms also push for arts companies to garner partial funding from outside sources, the stamp of NAC support marks arts organizations as suitable for corporate sponsorship, legitimizing them as strong brands for affiliation. Corporate giving to the arts is also incentivized through tax-breaks and dollar-for-dollar cultural matching schemes. Aside from grants to arts companies, independent artists are also nurtured indirectly by the National Arts Council's support of centers like the Arts House for literary work, Center 42 and the Substation for dramaturgy and theatre, and Dance Nucleus for dance. Aside from these, the NAC, along with private and public partner institutions, organize and manage numerous international art festivals in Singapore yearly. While state censorship was the primary form of control exercised over Singaporean artistic production in the twentieth century, today control has given way to tight regulation which is facilitated through state-funding for the arts.

Art making in Singapore, traditional or not, today proliferates within an atmosphere of all-encompassing governmentality. For the remaining part of this chapter, I focus on artists who have taken on this challenge— first, Raka Maitra's first ensemble choreography in her idiom of experimental Indian dance, which she offered as a challenge to reigning notions of "Asian contemporary dance" regionally. Second, I offer cases by a new generation of Malay dancers in Singapore, who challenge the neo-traditionalist orthodoxies and for whom critique and experimentation in traditional dance, made possible by the globalization of Singapore's performing arts scene, offers possibilities for the arts as a kind of liberal public sphere. In the case of Malay dance, artists critique prevalent gender ideology of Malay Muslim culture, advocating for greater inclusion of queer and feminist expression on stage and within the canon of Singaporean-Malay traditional dance. On the other hand, creative experiments in Singaporean Indian dance are found to disengage from a long history of cooptation by nationalist causes. Here, artists repurpose traditional form and poetics to quietly comment on bureaucratic incursions upon culture, within an atmosphere that is both nurtured and pruned by an imperious state.

Choreographing Anticipation

Singapore's "baroque ecology" is predicated on generating a level of uncertainty overflows of culture, politics and capital. Within it, arts and culture, much like political and economic fields of power, can no longer sustain visions of a clear and apprehensible future. The creative sector in Singapore is certainly managed by bureaucratic instruments, but the stated objective to make critically acclaimed and commercially successful work that can appease audiences globally, returns some agency back to the artist. Local practitioners vehemently disagree that their political voice is curtailed in accepting state funding and that they are still able to engage in "criticality, diversity and some level of radicalism" in their work, albeit within constraints (Wee "Creating High Culture" 88). T. Sasitharan, who heads the Intercultural Theatre

⁵⁶ The Arts Housing Scheme was implemented in 1985 to provide affordable spaces to arts groups and artists. Its main purpose is to give arts groups and artists a home within which they can develop their activities and thereby contribute to an active Singapore arts scene. For more information, see <https://www.nac.gov.sg/whatwedo/support/arts-spaces/art-housing-scheme.html>

Institute⁵⁷ in Singapore summarizes this debate as such — accepting state funds today does not make artists cronies of the neoliberal state; instead, it makes them participants in an emergent field of socially engaged art that involves artists, audiences and bureaucrats alike. Sasitharan claims that since the state manages public funds this is “the people’s art”. To recall *Journey to Nowhere*, the vision and mission statements projected on the wall of policy white-papers are not just directives from state to artist, but also dialogues between them. Grant and funding instruments hence become channels for sustained and tense deliberations on the cultural future of Singapore.

If neoliberal logic demands that creative labor appease state and market imperatives, the same logic also activates spaces from which the boundaries of categories—Indian, traditional, etc.—maybe pushed. Much like the emergence of Malay national dance described earlier in this paper, several late twentieth and early twenty-first-century dance scholars have pointed out that “classical” Indian dances emerged from within anti-colonial movements in India and are abstractions of precolonial religious and folk-dance forms⁵⁸. In Singapore, the figure of the Indian “traditional” dancer has served the “mix and match cultural fusion” of the twentieth century “CMIO”—Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other—era, suggesting a harmonious national consciousness free of racial tensions locally, while to tourists it offers an auto-Orientalized, concentrated dose of Asia set in the comfort of a modern super-city (Gilbert & Lo 9; Chang & Lim 167). As “creativity” becomes currency in Renaissance Singapore, Raka Maitra disrupts these expectations for Indian dance.

In the early 2000s, soon after the shift towards the creative economic model in Singapore, Maitra was a confusing presence to local funding and presenting institutions, where existing program categories are still organized along CMIO lines. Dance works qualified for funding buckets divided between either traditional Chinese, Malay, or Indian dance or the culturally neutral/ universal category of westernized, made-in-Singapore contemporary dance. Maitra’s self-authored technique of “Asian contemporary dance” refused to fit properly within the “I” of the CMIO funding framework, drawing as it did from the rich symbolic and gestural traditions of several South and Southeast Asian performing art forms. The following formal and technical elements are deployed variably in her choreography: First, the bent knee stance and controlled torso of Odissi and *Chhau*, dance and martial art forms from eastern India. Second, the slowness and minimalist principles of Japanese Noh and the Indian Sanskrit theatre form, *Kudiyattam*. Third: the facial and corporeal expressive strategies of Kudiyattam and Beijing Opera. Fourth: the comic physicality of the French LeCoque clowning technique. Her dancers receive sustained training in Chhau and Odissi, with bi-annual workshops in one of the many other forms mentioned above. Her pieces are set to music that often involve the traditional musical ensemble of Odissi dance and electronic, post-industrial soundscapes produced by well-known and celebrated Singaporean sonic artists like Bani Haykal and Zai Tang. Maitra’s sets are minimal, working with Singaporean multimedia artists like Zai Kuning to create abstract works that are symbolic complements to her choreography. Fundamentally, Maitra’s is a Singapore-made form

⁵⁷ As stated on their website: Intercultural Theatre Institute (ITI), formerly known as Theatre Training and Research Programme (TTRP), is an independent theatre school for contemporary artists. Founded in 2000 by Singapore’s acclaimed theatre practitioners and cultural thought leaders, Kuo Pao Kun (1939 - 2002) and T. Sasitharan, ITI is a unique enterprise in theatre training, social and cultural interaction. For more information, visit: <https://www.iti.edu.sg/about/> accessed 22 December 2018.

⁵⁸ See Marglin 1985; Kersenboom 1987; Soneji 2011

of intercultural dance-theatre. Yet, as a recipient of the National Arts Council's Seed Grant between 2014 and 2017, *Chowk Productions* was classified as a Traditional Indian Arts company, expected to attract existing audiences for Indian dance, programmed into Indian dance platforms and festivals locally. Maitra shrugs off this label:

"The aim of Chowk Dance Productions is to search for new forms of expression in dance. I am uninterested in labels or categories that are given to performances to make them sometimes more saleable or palatable and sometimes more familiar or comforting to audiences. I have always worked to bridge dichotomies of "classical" and "contemporary", "physical" and "stylized", "Indian" And "western", and so on. What concerns me primarily, is the expression and the state of the body in space and time."

(Maitra, "The Blind Age," 2014)

While Creative Industries reorientation of cultural production in Singapore anticipated an Asian Renaissance, there is a discrepancy between artistic and bureaucratic imaginations. Raka Maitra's indeterminate Indian dance form both anticipates the dissolution of CMIO-era silos and frustrates bureaucratic instruments that struggle to properly discipline her work within familiar categories. Her undeniable success makes Maitra a compelling, even if a defiant entity for her grant officers. Chowk Productions has toured internationally with many of their full-length works, including performances at *the Les Hivernales* (Winter Festival) in Avignon, the Melkweg in Amsterdam, and at the Kennedy Centre in Washington D.C., to name a few, to modest levels of critical and commercial success. Locally, Chowk Productions have become a standard feature of The Esplanade Theatres' programming calendar, positioning them alongside other acts deemed to possess a "global quality". Maitra's work is also morally ambiguous—its ethics are not clearly readable. On the surface, they are romantic-modernist works on the losses of contemporary life—of disenchantment and the waning of poetics in the information age (*Khayyam's Rubaiyat* 2013), of the experience of Singapore's labor diaspora (*From Another Land* 2016), of the echoes of war in the region (*The Blind Age* 2014 and *The Second Sunrise* 2018), and the unmoored subjectivities of a transnational populace in transit (*From: The Platform* 2017). But her works are nearly always about the persistence of living under conditions of total subjugation. Consider Maitra's work, *The Hungry Stones* (2011), her first ensemble choreography which she began constructing in 2009:

Four dancers in moss-colored, knee-length tunics and black tights emerge from the walls of an old villa. Their outfits are reminiscent of the salwar kameez, attire that has been common to men and women in much of the Indian subcontinent for several hundreds of years. The dancers, bent in a low plié with ankles far apart—the chowka position of Odissi dance—move with excruciating slowness, in a rhythmic back and forth movement. As they advance, the light illuminates their faces first and then their bodies—like shadows gaining substance. They gaze, somber and unblinking, at an infinite distance far beyond. As they emerge into the light, the set reveals itself to be an oriental mansion of erstwhile splendor, with the decrepit and ominous air of a ruined pleasure house. There is a large wide brimmed ornate pot, about 2 feet high, on one side of the stage. It is full of water, fed by drops falling from above. Four sections of the dance follow. In the first, the dancers become happy inhabitants of house, playing with objects in the house, splashing water in the pot, teasing each other and the audience. In the second section, each dancer reveals a story about her life, through movement—some humorous, some treacherous,

some sad— but most of them are stories of anticipation. In the third section, all of the dancers render an exquisite dance about waiting, with four independent stories unravelling all at once. In the final section, there is dissolution; the dancers merge into the walls again, fading into the black. Yet before the audience can begin their applause, the walls become luminous, and from the shadows, the dancers emerge again.

The Hungry Stones was first showcased at the National University of Singapore Cultural Center (UCC) in 2011 and later featured at the *Les Hivernales* Winter festival in Avignon, France in 2016. In the original Bengali short story, *Khudito Pashan* (literally meaning “the hungry stones”), by the Indian poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, the protagonist is a young Indian member of the colonial civil service in late 19th century Bengal. His intense boredom with work as an excise officer is alleviated when he rents an abandoned, apparently haunted mansion that was once the seraglio of a minor Indian sultan. The titular “hungry” stones of the house first feed the young man seductive visions of exalted pleasure, conjuring enticing apparitions of beautiful women in silks and gems, carousing amidst fountains of rose water in a splendid palace. Then it feeds on him. The house, with its aura of festering, baroque extravagance first terrifies the isolated young man, yet he slowly begins to feel “as if the whole house was like a living organism slowly and imperceptibly digesting (me) by the action of some stupefying gastric juice” (Tagore, “The Hungry Stones”). Yet these visions are born of his own imagination and his presumably Victorian literary education— “Methought that one of the thousand and one Arabian Nights had been wafted to me from the world of romance,” he muses (*ibid*). In exchange for these visions of the phantasmic Orient, our hero surrenders his drive, ambition, youth and optimism as fodder to appease the mansion’s spectral, eternally famished inhabitants. The man becomes lost to the house which consumes and absorbs him.

Maitra’s adaptation of Tagore’s short story projects the complexities of the postcolonial experience on the dancing body. In Maitra’s version, she takes on the perspective of the hungry stones themselves— the oriental imaginary of a lusty civil servant whose ambitions feed the machine of the colonial administrative edifice. The image of the seraglio and its women have long been constitutive of the orientalist fantasy and Maitra’s choreography reclaims these figures to convey multiple levels of meaning. On one level, it materializes the many anonymous bodies of the harem— concubines who become symbols of power and prosperity for their masters within the patriarchal social formations of precolonial India. It aligns them with other subaltern subjects of nationalism— the Indian temple dancers important among them, were also professional women, lost to history⁵⁹. In *The Hungry Stones*, Maitra conjures scenes from their everyday lives, disposing of their image as mythic, spectral figures and recasts them as real women, living with each other in friendship or rivalry, in ordinary lives of ennui and emptiness, in perpetual suspension between hope and despair. Maitra’s work, like that of Harith and Adam’s explored later, sensitively resurrects the dancing girls of the past — neither as voluptuous figures of the imagination, nor in service of historical revision. Instead, she offers the audience beautiful, choreographed portraits of women who lived and loved and waited.

On yet another level, Maitra’s take on Tagore’s *The Hungry Stones* selects and builds upon a trope of Indian aesthetics and spirituality, with which Indian temple dance traditions are closely associated. Odissi, which forms the technical basis of Maitra’s choreography, has a long

⁵⁹ The Indian temple dancer has been thoroughly considered and resurrected within Indian dance scholarship Marglin (1985), Kersenboom (1987), Soneji (2011).

history of association with the *bhakti* movement in India, where the relationship between the human and the transcendent is depicted as a heteronormative romantic relationship. The poetics of waiting is an important mode of performing this relationship— it is a teleological orientation in which all actions and experiences of the present lead toward absolution, *nirvana*, the merging of the human and the divine. In *The Hungry Stones*, this union is perpetually delayed—the ghosts of orientalist imaginaries never achieve their release, and they are absorbed into the structures that continue to animate them. This aspect of failure is key to understanding how Maitra’s work stages the afterlife of traditional dance in Singapore, suggesting that art fails to arrive at transcendent meanings when it is recast as abstractions within nationalist and governmental paradigms.

The Hungry Stones functions as an allegory of how contemporary practitioners of traditional dance experience the directive of “innovating within tradition” for Singapore’s Creative Industries. Tradition in Singapore is at an impasse, dithering between visions of enlightened futures and the attachments to “authentic” precolonial pasts. Successive eras of arts and cultural policy in Singapore have suspended traditional dance forms within a regulatory apparatus that recalls Tagore’s palace of illusions; these dance forms remain as ghosts of colonial and national imaginaries, reanimated today through orientalist lenses as voluptuous visions for entertainment or as their sanitized alternatives for nation building.

Joget’s Dirty Secret

Muhammad Norman Bin Muhamed Farid or “Soultari” Farid, who featured in *the Journey to Nowhere* performance described in the opening section of this paper, is an ethno-choreologist with ongoing doctoral work at King’s College in London on Malay dance history and its contemporary orientations in Singapore. In 2018, Farid has emerged as a prominent voice in the Malay dance community, as the face of a new generation of dancers who are shifting Malay dance from CMIO-era preoccupations of reinforcing distinct Singaporean-Malay identity, to exploring progressive humanist concerns. Farid, on his part, maintains that “traditional arts doesn’t exist, all art is contemporary”.

Farid, like the other artists presented in this section are responding to shifts in intergenerational power dynamics in Malay dance today, working with Singapore’s little tradition of Malay dance to serve contemporary contingencies. Malay dance companies of the CMIO-era, such as *Era Dance Theatre* and *Aspirasi*, to name two prominent ones, have responded to the call for creativity and “innovation within tradition” to generate dance productions that thematize modernity as a social evil, remaining loyal to basic Malay customs, philosophies and embedded valuations of gender, sexuality and religious morality. A new generation of Malay dancers is concerned with critiquing the normative values of the “Malayness”, insisting that the “deviant” subjectivities of the past, excluded from polite society and from the archives of Malay dance history, become reintegrated into the communal fold. In the three performances detailed later, the history of the dance-musical genres of *Joget* and *Rongeng* serve as important material to question the orthodoxies of Malay dance and consequently, of “Malayness” in Singapore. But first, I offer a brief history of regional Malay dance as a proper preamble to the later described performances.

The emergence of a characteristic Malay traditional dance in Singapore rehearses the anxieties of mid-20th century nationalist movements in the region. For the majority of Singapore’s existence from the 1960s to the late twentieth century, the logic of CMIO

multiculturalism and “side-by-side” living between races, conferred a homogenized “Malay” identity upon multiple ethnic groups indigenous to British colonies in Sabah, Borneo and Sarawak (Goh 236-242). Malay dance in Singapore parallels this simplification. Anis Nor writes on the production of Malay dance through the normalizing of styles and motifs from a multitude of folk dances native to the greater Malayan archipelago, cross pollinating between the dance styles of Peninsular Malaysia, Singapore and the Indonesian islands of Sumatra and Java⁶⁰.

Joget, a musical genre often accompanied by dances featuring groups of male and female couples, forms the basis of Malay dance in Singapore. It emerges from earlier folk, court and social dancing practices, including the *ronngeng*, a dance/musical form that incorporated *joget*, *inang*, *asli* and *lenggang* temporal and rhythmic variations of Malayan music. Van der Putten details the long history of *ronngeng* as a social dance in the region, where “female dancers performed on a make-shift stage, (and) males were invited to participate for a certain fee” (118).

Between the late 19th and mid-20th centuries, *joget* activities in “dance halls”⁶¹, bars, and social clubs in urban centers recalled earlier *ronngeng* practice, where male dancers could purchase tickets to dance with female “taxi-dancers”, albeit without physical contact (Van der Putten 115-125). These activities were considered “depraved” by anti-colonial reformers, as conflations with western cabarets strongly offended the norms of Malay Muslim identity of that era. Chua Soo Pong reports the popularity of *joget* in dance halls in Singapore in the 1950s. For the dance to acquire its eventual status as characteristic of a hyphenated Singaporean-Malay national identity, it had to shed its “dirty” connotations— “dirt”, Van der Putten quotes Mary Douglas here, as “‘something out of place’, something that is not in concordance with a prevailing value system in a certain society or culture” (114). Social reformers in the 1930s campaigned to eradicate the legacy of the “taxi dancer”. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, individuals and groups of Malay dancers initiated performing arts institutions that successfully established these neo-traditional dances as characteristic performances of Malay heritage and identity in Singapore⁶², actively negotiating a communal identity through processes of editing, excising and inclusion.

On September 23, 2018, Farid presented a lecture-performance series that was staged first at Center 42, and later adapted for SCOPE 3, a work-in-process presentation series at the National Arts Council’s incubator for independent dance, Dance Nucleus⁶². Here I focus on the latter presentation. Farid presents the audiences with two instructional texts on Malay social dance from the 20th century, to show the gaps between the imperative, traditionalist tone of the texts and the subjectivity of the contemporary Malay dancer. Farid first presents excerpts from a Malay publication from the 1960s, unearthed at the British Library in London, which instructs the reader on the proper technique and social cues for dancing the *joget*. The second is a research paper published in 1993 by dance historian Mohammed Anis Nor on the *lenggang*, the fast

⁶⁰ Malay dance also features technique from *Zapin*, which has now become a mainstay of contemporary vocabulary, was derived from folk and martial arts traditions, as well as those of the *Terinai* and *Joget Gamelan* were once predominantly performed in the royal court.

⁶¹ These are better understood as “fairs”. Van der Putten describes these as follows, “In these parks the different forms (dance) converged and all were given its own: cinemas, stages for Teochew or Cantonese operas, Indian dances and Malay bangsawan, cabarets and ballrooms, restaurants and beer gardens, a place for fairground attractions, and a stage where *ronngeng* or *joget* girls would be waiting for their clients open for anybody to see who would have paid the 5–10 cents entrance fee.” (119)

⁶² As described on the Dance Nucleus website- “Dance Nucleus fosters a culture of critical discourse, self-education, artistic exchange and practical support.” For more, see <http://www.dancenucleus.com/about.html>

tempo, solo female variation of Malay dance, which has its origins in the dance-musical genre of joget. Farid animates the illustrations and photographs on these instructional texts, demonstrating them on his own body, while translating the writing from Bahasa Malaya to English for the multilingual audience at Dance Nucleus. He makes a joke of the schoolmarmish tone of both documents, which reveal much about the gender scripting and conservative norms around the body and its movements in 20th century Malay society. These prescriptions include the following:

“[the dance] is spoiled by swaying hips too fast and stomping of feet...this will change the shape or form of Malay dance - which has been codified for many years,” and later, “the male dancer is forbidden from acting like a female”, “the beauty of the male dancer is as a protector and accompaniment of the female,” and “the strength of the male dancer lies in the maleness that he portrays and remains distinct from female. . .”, and the like.

The audience at this event, a small crowd of Singapore’s independent dancers that frequent Dance Nucleus showcases, react either with jovial incredulity at the quaint conservativeness of the author, or if they are Malay, nod in agreement. These directives, Farid explains, are repeated and reinforced in Malay dance settings in Singapore. Farid describes himself as a naturally “effeminate” dancer who was enthralled by the beauty of the female movements in joget. This disposition regularly got him into trouble with his gurus. “Growing up learning from my (male) guru, there were many times when I was called names used to describe an effeminate person—you know—in Bahasa Malaya. But they were conditioning me to learn what sort of movements I must do and observe when doing my male movements. But lots of my movements were effeminate because I am feminine,” he explains (Farid, “Scope 3”).

By way of Yvonne Hardt, I want to highlight two tactics of contemporary choreography that Farid uses in order to align tradition with the concerns of the present (28-32). First, Farid stages the ethnographic aspect of his research in modes of presentation reminiscent of colonial anthropological practice —archival materials on Malay dance become both sources of knowledge and objects of wonder and amusement for a contemporary audience. The audience follows Farid’s tone of quiet incredulity to marvel at the moral dispositions and cultural valuations of their predecessors. Performing the anthropologist/dance-historian, Farid positions himself at a critical distance from his own lineage, exposing and commenting on the failures of Malay traditional values to properly realize contemporary standards of humanism and social progressivism. Secondly, using western contemporary dance tactics of historical appropriation and reenactment, Farid stages the impossible — a technically accurate, queer reconstruction of Malay traditional dance — that both actualizes and recontextualizes the relationship between the group and the individual (Hardt 43). The lecture and dance format of the performance mutes the transgressive nature of Farid’s demonstration; in presenting female movements while articulating his desire towards embodying them, Farid both animates and queers the archive of traditional Malay dance.

Farid’s work characterizes the evolution of Malay dance in Singapore from the CMIO to the creative industries era, deploying “creativity” to relinquish the hold of culturally and morally conservative values over Malay dance. He does so by problematizing technique. In this sense, tradition is reconstituted and activated in contemporary settings through the creative and risky experiments undertaken by its practitioners. They are risky because the edifice of tradition in Singapore, though invented, has its own legitimizing powers that contemporary artists working with traditional forms must appease to position themselves as worthy of public attention and

resources. Experimental dancers break with tradition first by critiquing its strictures— the demand for technical precision and strict adherence to convention. It is through these strictures that traditional forms invoke allegiances to authentic past practices and hence gather the affective force to coordinate the moral and ethical standards for national and ethnic communities of the present. Accordingly, Farid, along with new generation of contemporary Malay dancers exercise individual choice to actively shape the ethical dimensions of their art works. Rather than engaging with discourses of intangible heritage that ascribe value to the wholesale preservation of traditional forms, they problematize the parts of them that no longer align with progressive humanist concerns of contemporary Singaporeans.

If Farid's performance problematizes the received tradition of Malay dance through performance, Norhaizad Adam's *The Wrong Geng*, more explicitly recalls the "dance-hall" history and the disappeared subject, the taxi-dancer, of this form. Performed in 2018 as part of a contemporary Malay dance showcase *Joget*⁶³, *The Wrong Geng* was curated for The Esplanade's annual *Pentas* program, the stages alternate narratives for Singaporean Malayness. The tagline for *Joget* reads, "No one will stop you. No one will chase you home. For now, you are free. So, let's joget!" The title, *The Wrong Geng* is an obvious, onomatopoeic play on the term *ronggeng*— to Adam *ronggeng* dancers of the past were simply on the wrong side of the cultural fence. His performance aims to establish their continuing presence in Malay cultural life in Singapore:

The performance begins with the artist in a t-shirt and boxer shorts in a darkened room. Lively music from the disco era plays in the background. He moves his body casually, unlike a professional dancer, bouncing on his knees and shaking his head and torso to the easy rhythms of the music like a weekender in a club. As the performance proceeds, the music in the background changes successively, from the popular disco themes to folk music and then to that of "traditional" Malay music that usually accompanies public Malay dance performances. Progressively, alongside the changing music, Adam's movements begin to acquire more and more definition, gaining the formal closed-and-bent knee stance, the tilted torso and the definite, straight and swift lines of male movement in Malay dance. With each switch in the music, Adam puts on a piece of clothing from the traditional dance costume of the male Malay dancer. By the end of the piece, he is fully outfitted and recognizable as the performing Malay dancer. He then picks up what appears to be a begging bowl, goes around to the audience, soliciting coins and currency.

Adam's performance restores the "dirty secret" of the Taxi Dancer of the early and mid-20th century dance-halls back on stage. As a metaphor for the evolution of traditional Malay dance from dance-hall to community center to national stage, the slow transition of musical and costume elements gesture at the successive layers of discourses that have clothed and constructed respectable Malay identity on stage. *Joget*, which featured three other performances of contemporary Malay experience, generated a fair amount of debate in Malay and Singaporean dance circles. In a podcast interview featured on Arts Equator, a Singapore-based arts media website, arts commentators Corine Tan, Sze Wei Chan, Chloe Chotrani, along with "Soultari" Amin Farid discuss how Adam's performance is the artist's way of "giving back to the

⁶³ *Joget* consisted of four contemporary choreographies in Malay dance presented by Norisham Osman, Norhaizad Adam, Badarudin Hassan and Hasyimah Harith. The dramaturgy for this work was done by Susan Sentler, who is a former Senior Lecturer with Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in London, and currently teaches at Lasalle College of The Arts in Singapore.

community,” — inviting the spirit of the Taxi Dancer, rejected and blackened by the force of history, culture and politics, back into the Malay fold and thanking her for her artistic labor (Tan, “Podcast 37”).

In a later work within the same performance showcase titled *Nak Dara*, Malay dancer Hasyimah Harith and her dancers stage a quiet feminist politics for Malay dance. In the performance, four female dancers enter the stage of the Esplanade Dance Studio. Their sarongs are wrapped above their busts, their black spaghetti straps of their inner garments show, cutting deep lines into their bare shoulders. They wear elaborate batik print head-dresses and are clothed in batik sarongs, typical of female attire in peninsular Malaya and Indonesia up until the early twentieth century, which has today been replaced by the more conservative *Baju Kurung*⁶⁴. Together, the women perform slow, sensual movements adapted from Malay dance, knees bent and torsos tilted. They glide across the room with light, quiet footsteps, their arms making soft arabesques, palms caressing their own bodies across the arms and face. As the dance progresses, the dancers sigh and murmur sounds of pleasure, as their skin gathers glistening sweat. Though the dancers distil a meditative mood through an inward-gaze, this scene of female-intimacy has a palpable erotic charge that electrifies the audience. Their deliberate display of femininity is heightened by their disinterest in the audience, even as the lilting movements and pleasant choreography directs the audience to gaze at them and partake in the simple pleasures of self-care.

To Harith, the performance was simply about pausing all expectations imposed on the Malay female dancer — to counter the celebratory ideal of the Malay woman as modestly enticing and pleasantly comported in service of an audience. Instead, Harith claims that she was dancing for herself, as a way of bringing “the private acts of self-soothing into the public space to examine our judgment of the female body” (Harith, 2018b). She hence pushes away the representational thrust of Malay dance and asks the audience to look inward: who are we and what have we denied ourselves? This challenges the long history of Malay dance which casts the dancing female body in service to the desires of the Malay community: first as paid entertainment in eroticized contexts, and next, as the performance of ideal Malay-Muslim femininity— youthful, appropriately performing a docile sexuality, within the conventional bounds maintained by the male masters of Malay dance, apparently on behalf of the community.

Harith’s piece received mixed reactions from the audience, and seems to have pleased funders, as the piece was funded again for iterations in 2019 and 2022. To some, the piece was not particularly limited to a Malay feminist politics, signaling for one audience member, new-age, western imagery of the “divine feminine” that cites from a cross-cultural repository of images and feminist narratives of the self-defined and powerful woman. For others it was a performance of individual agency, where dance becomes a site for staging the personal experience of pleasure. Harith and Adam, who are married, recount how the older generation of Malay dancers, who comprise the Singapore Malay Dance Committee, found Harith’s work unreasonably provocative to Malay orthodoxy. They claimed that there was something sordid about young Malay Muslim women performing the national dance revealing their bra-straps (Adam, 2018b). While audience reactions have been mixed, critical reactions have been unequivocally positive. Farid articulates the importance of Harith’s work as such:

⁶⁴ The *baju kurung* is a traditional Malay costume which is loosely translated from Javanese/Bahasa Malaya as “enclosed dress”, consisting of a loose-fitting full-length dress, consisting of a skirt and a blouse. This type of costume is the national dress of Malaysia.

“For (Harith’s) work – oh, sensuality. We do not have that. We don’t show that in Malay dance. We don’t have contact either! When you have two, a male and a female dancer dancing, we don’t touch! Because it’s just not in the decorum. And for her to be clad, and for her dancers to be clad in spaghetti [straps] and just a sarong to cover, well that’s a contestation. Now, a lot of traditionalists who came felt very offended by what they saw. The female body in such a manner, not dressed appropriately. And I thought it was interesting because that sensuality, that touch, and I must say also, as a researcher of the scene and of the community, seventy percent of Malay dance choreographers are male. So this is an opportunity for women’s voices to be heard. And for (Hasyimah Harith) to do something like that, that was definitely a statement”

(Farid in Tan, “Podcast 37”).

As public performances that are still being discussed and debated in both Malay arts circles and the wider forums for art in Singapore, these works importantly counter existing spectacles of Malay bodies on stage as vessels of a homogenized, celebratory ideal of the nation and community. The use of English language, alongside Bahasa Malaya, and contemporary performance methods make their work and their concerns intelligible to a non-Malay speaking audience, consolidating allegiances across ethnic and linguistic lines. I consider the above experiments in Malay dance as dances in the interrogative mode; they question the normative understandings of “Malayness” and “Asianness” in Singapore. The push for “creativity”, it would seem, surfaces as social critique in ethnic Malay dance, realizing a socially engaged mode of dancing in ways that are distinct from the community-formation impulses of the CMIO era.

Traditional Malay dance hence shifts to become the locus of something that approximates what Christopher Balme calls the “theatrical public sphere”. Black box spaces of performances, post-performance dialogues and online spaces become open forums between artist, audience and critics where questions of gender, identity and belonging are debated. This is an encouraging development in the Singapore context, with its history of snuffing out cultural political debates for fears of inciting social conflict. While such efforts effectively counter the separatist consequences of CMIO multiculturalism and the social attitudes thus generated, there are obvious limits to the “liberality” of a creative public sphere in an ecosystem that is entirely state funded and closely monitored by its political apparatus. While conservative norms of Malay identity are critiqued, the existence of these valuations are deemed epiphenomenal—the state’s historic and continuing role in shaping identity and individual subjectivity is not explicitly addressed or properly problematized. While these performances erode at and resist the orthodoxies of localized Malay traditions, they serve larger national imperatives to open up Singaporeans to new value systems that are friendly to the neoliberal economy; the self-reflexive and self-fashioning subjects of the creative economy are still hemmed in by state-imposed limits on what can be said about it. As creative entrepreneurs who have started their own dance companies through different types of funding from the NAC, these artists in fact emerge as models of the Singaporean Renaissance—risk takers emerging from tradition to forge new routes for Singaporean enlightenment.

Conclusion

While the traditional arts in Singapore have stood for “timeless” values, the contingencies of the knowledge economy, it would seem, force a kind of coevalness upon traditional dance with other contemporary performing arts forms: traditional dancers no longer bearing the task of

linking up past and future priorities for their respective ethnic communities, but in reconstructing the techniques, aesthetics and moral dimensions of tradition to imagine novel futures for Singaporean culture. The artists presented in this chapter are taking on the transition as an opportunity, anticipating the shifting location of traditional dance amidst rapid and intensifying flows of cultural globalization and neoliberal governance in Singapore. Dancers take this as a creative opportunity—to capture that elusive dichotomy of being particularly Singaporean and universal, at once. Successful artists in Singapore, who aim to survive within the industrial model for creativity and remain true to their artistic vision, are like Lauren Berlant’s intuitionists—they are certain only about their precarious position, and must selectively deploy their creative muscle to transform, “the ongoing desperation of bad precarity into an aleatory intuition that feels like openness” (Berlant, 2012:92). In other words, the incessant push, primarily via funding instruments, to repeatedly articulate artistic intentions, divest subversive creative tactics, declare intentions, and deliver economic gains and social good in an atmosphere that is constantly tweaked and recalibrated by policy changes and political will—sensitize artists to not just threats, but also to the opportunities within a cultural field that is rapidly evolving.

Culture in Singapore is no longer overdetermined by abstract bureaucratic machinery disbursing carefully preselected discourses of “Asian” multicultural values. Since the early 2000s the physical and virtual landscape of Singapore has become inundated with people and ideas flowing along global circuits of new media technology, knowledge and labor migration. With these flows, new political forms and cultural practices have also suffused and reorganized everyday life in Singapore. The political and bureaucratic structures that circumscribe cultural production in Singapore must contend with a new kind of citizenry, if it is to realize the ideal of a great, global city of “choreographed entanglements—“the close interaction between foreign experts and citizens (to) engender high rates of competitiveness, creativity and knowledge values” (A. Ong, “Neoliberalism” 180). Singapore is now constituted by a self-fashioning population that chooses from moral discourses and communal affiliations disbursed along global, often virtual circuits. Ethnicity and loyalty to traditional and national cultural values are now simply one among a range of ethical constructs for individuals to select from. As the arts stage subjectivities in transition, traditional artists strive to creatively keep up their relevance and remain attractive to new generations of practitioners and audiences. The arts therefore become a site in which contemporary subjectivities are mediated between state and citizen actors.

If “Modernity destroys tradition,” as Anthony Giddens suggests, and neoliberalism entails “creative destruction” as David Harvey suggests, then the contemporary experiments of traditional dancers presented in this chapter anticipate and stage possible afterlives of ethnic practices in Singapore. The next chapter explores these impulses in the expanded frame of regional dance emerging from Southeast Asia. As new orders of rationality fragment the coherence of 20th century invented traditions, regional contemporary Asian dancers repurpose them as a citational resource from which to imagine contingent artistic futures.

Chapter 4: Generic Engineering

What does it mean to make contemporary Asian performance today, and how are experiments of Indian dancers working in and around Singapore responding to a regional arts ecology that has created crises of funding, relevance and value among dancers of traditional and ethnic forms? In previous chapters, we see traditional Indian and Malay dancers in Singapore creatively reinventing traditional dance forms in response to the shifting assemblage of cultural production. Previous chapters offer contrasting effects of choreographic reassembly; firstly, in the case of Santha Bhaskar or Apsaras Arts mentioned in Chapter 2, some choreographers choose to participate in the global Indian classical dance network, innovating within the form through choreographic reassembly to introduce new themes and elements, without necessarily challenging the orientalist frameworks that continue to marginalize non-western dance as ethnic or traditional. As identified in Chapter 1 however, they also do not challenge conservative social norms that structure traditional dance technique—as pedagogical methods and choreography in studios involve choreopolicing (Lepecki, 16) of the dancing body to ally with patriarchal norms of gender and bodily performance, and invest it with representational values of the nation, religion and community at the cost of individual self-expression and autonomy. The experiments showcased in chapter 3 on the other hand, are reflexive and critical of tradition—both as a genre within a cultural infrastructure that only understands the concept superficially as well as a world view with specific ‘regimes of value’ (Collier & Lakoff 2007: 31) attached to them. As traditionally trained dancers enter the secular world of contemporary arts, they straddle both self-reflexivity and disenchantment, the two faces of modernity and rationalization. The trouble is that disenchantment appears to be the price to pay for entry into the mainstream of global culture – the flourishing world of contemporary art practice, which attracts elite, cosmopolitan audiences and the well-funded institutions that serve them. How do artists stay with this trouble, to use Donna Haraway’s now-famous phrase?

It is Haraway’s sobering suggestion that the ethics of ‘staying with the trouble’ implores us to mourn the irreversible loss of that which is dead or tending towards extinction in times of transition, even as we partially salvage its elements (2016: 101). The ‘aesthetic of acclimatization’ I will characterize later in the chapter is partly an aesthetic of mourning and a staging of slow death of ‘the traditional’ in Southeast Asian dance as choreographers reframe their dance forms for urban, cosmopolitan stages. The aesthetic of acclimatization is thus an emergent movement towards recuperation and adaptation of the traditional in an era of cultural climate change, as both governmental and ethical regimes of value evolve in ways that render certain cultural practices as untenable. This chapter, heavier on performance analysis than ethnography, considers five works by traditionally trained choreographers of different forms, based in various sites in urban Asia, creating new contemporary Asian work. Choy Ka Fai’s *Soft Machine* most obviously demonstrates the trouble with traditional performance being placed within a contemporary art practice frame. Analysis of this piece works as a foil to showcase the work of artists featured later in this chapter, who attempt a second order style of choreographic reassembly—a kind of cross-generic engineering of performance—to redefine their positions within the Southeast Asian arts ecology.

Conceptually, this chapter continues to be informed by Collier and Ong’s *global assemblages* framework to consider how global forms – here contemporary, conceptual art philosophies and practices structured into an ecology of museum, gallery and performing arts institutions—reassemble situated practices, though I use and draw upon a range of different

metaphors to illustrate the processes and effects emerging of choreography. One set of metaphors cluster around thinking about acclimatization and considers processes of senescence, decay and slow death. They supplement and draw attention to the problems with horticultural metaphors that abound in Singaporean governmental rationality today that gardens cultural production: as explored briefly later in this chapter, regulation of labor and knowledge production are seen as practices of intentional and selective gardening. As neoliberal pragmatism informs arts funding, however, some market dominant art forms valorized by state arbiters thrive, while minor communities of practice survive under constraints and become endangered. Among the latter are the invented traditional dance forms of Singapore's Indian and Malay ethnic minority communities, abstracted from postcolonial nationalist contexts in South and Southeast Asia.

Choy's mechanical metaphor implied by the title of his work *Soft Machine* on the other hand, is more apt to describe his style of multimedia documentary performance and less useful to characterize what it captures—ongoing, embodied, organic processes of cultural mutation in response to shifts in the ecologies of artmaking in Southeast Asia. In its place, another set of organic metaphors from Anthropocene discourse, primarily those indebted to Donna Haraway's notion of "staying with the trouble," arrive at an appropriate description of the complex and transitional world of Asian contemporary dance. Her method of "tentacular thinking" may be applied to bring the structuring forces of globalization, postcolonial nationalism and the competing interests of arts and cultural institutions into the same frame of analysis. This makes apparent the changing conditions of cultural production in Asia that necessitate intercultural and cross-generic choreographic experimentation.

The *Soft Machine* of Asian Contemporary Dance

Soft Machine, Singaporean artist Choy Ka Fai's 2014 video performance series on Asian contemporary dance, draws its title from the American avant-garde writer William Burroughs' "cut-up" novel of the same name. While Burroughs' *Soft Machine* features his signature technique of postmodern authorship, stitching together strips of writing to create word collages (Jones, 32), Choy's *Soft Machine* features four documentary-performance films, selected from an archive of over 80 interviews with Asia-based dancemakers. In titling this compendium as he does, Choy extends Burroughs' notion of the body transcending social control through extreme psychedelic and sexual experience to the performing body of the contemporary dancer working within the constraints and opportunities for artists in Asia: "I see the body as a soft machine that cuts and pastes and becomes a new machine by itself" (qtd. in Meganck). Choy deliberately features artists who are marginal to their respective national cultural contexts, each striving to construct new movement idioms that convey the emergent emotional sensibilities and political contingencies particular to their position. While *Soft Machine* is invaluable as an archive of emerging Asian performance in the early 2010s, there are some serious limitations to Choy's framing. Firstly, even as the intended audience for Choy's work is global, each of the four artists featured in *Soft Machine* are presented as being hemmed in by their local political and cultural contexts. Choy's expansive archive of interviews is, as Michelle Lim identifies, motivated by an ethnographic impulse to study "movements and moments in dance scenes" across Asia (216).

This ethnographic function that Lim identifies in *Soft Machine* is valuable, as the challenges faced by dance-makers in Asia are relatively unknown to audiences and patrons around the world. However, even as this documentary performance series fascinates and edifies

cosmopolitan audiences⁶⁵, *Soft Machine* still fails to show that Asian contemporary dance emerges in a space of intense interaction between local arts clusters and the transnational arts network in which these works circulate.

Choy's *Soft Machine* is itself a challenge to, and therefore in some ways a product of this local-global entanglement. Conceived in response to viewing the "Out of Asia" series at London's Sadler's Wells Theatre, Choy challenges the coherence of the genre of so-called 'Asian contemporary dance' presented on Western stages, as well as the tendency for a few big-name dancers and companies, often led by visionary exponents of the Asian diaspora, to consolidate salient narratives around this genre (qtd. in Meganck). In this chapter, I offer an analysis of contemporary Asian dance that troubles the binary frames of native-diaspora, global-local that Choy places upon choreographers based in Asia. Instead, I highlight how artistic and political projects created by dancers in Asia are disseminated across interlinked, global networks of arts and performance.

Second, as *Soft Machine* is a genre-bending work that defies strict classification as documentary theatre, dance film, video installation, or even expanded cinema, it is often programmed into dance presentation platforms. Choy has therefore earned the label of "choreographer," even though he himself prefers to be described as a "performance-maker" (Lim 218). However, as a work of director-led, cut-and-paste film choreography, Choy's metaphor of the soft machine does not add to our understanding of what kinds of choreographic techniques are at play in the varieties of Asian contemporary dance that proliferate today.

Thirdly, the video-performances still center on Choy's own narrative of the Asian dancers' bodies. Lim suggests that Choy's video-performances showcase dancers as corporeal archives that "re-authenticate tradition through movement," rather than presenting either traditional dances performed in the contemporary setting or new dance sequences under construction (218). However, the common impulse among artists featured in the video interviews is not to re-authenticate tradition but to partially recover what is valuable in traditional forms of dance, while seeking to expand beyond the limitations of the traditional frame. A close reading of the interviews in *Soft Machine*, which are beyond the scope of this chapter, draw our attention to the rapidly shifting nature of cross-cultural experiments in Asian performance today, motivations which are both specific to each artist and varied among them. The two works in the next segment offer cases of choreographers striving not to reauthenticate tradition but to problematize, deconstruct, splice and stitch traditional movement forms with a range of other genres of performance in a process I call "generic engineering." The first is the collaborative work *Behalf* (2018) by Thai and Taiwanese choreographers Pichet Klunchun and Chen Wu-Kang. The second is Indonesian dancer Rianto's *Medium* (2018). Like the four works featured on *Soft Machine*, these works emerge amid messy entanglements with the heritage, politics, and social dynamics of performance in contexts where the local and global are interspersed. In response to the perpetually precarious state of these arts ecologies, artists featured in this article regenerate their practices through processes of breakdown and recombination, working to sustain continuity through change—in short, through processes of mutation under conditions of crisis.

⁶⁵ See list of showings of *Soft Machine* around the world in Choy Ka Fai's website <https://www.ka5.info/about/news.html> (Accessed 30 April 2021)

Composting Contemporary Asian Performance

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the world of Asian contemporary dance emerges from the compost⁶⁶ of its pre-colonial folk, traditional and popular arts, which are now in an advanced state of decay. The word ‘decay’ may be applied here in two senses. The first sense is biological – the cellular breakdown of something that was once alive and is now the humus for new forms of life. Contemporary dance in Asia emerges in the wake of the slow death of pre-modern folk and courtly performing art forms, as successive eras of colonialism, postcolonial nationalism and globalization have irretrievably disrupted a plethora of Asian life-worlds—moral paradigms, systems of patronage and communities of spectatorship—that once sustained these forms. This slow death in turn provokes its own narratives of man-made disasters and cultural climate change.

The second sense in which I apply the notion of decay is in the nuclear sense—unstable configurations under radioactive decay, radically altering the environment in the process of its extinction. As Asian contemporary dance-makers develop their work across performing arts institutions in Asia, Europe and elsewhere, their cross-generic and cross-cultural experiments critically intervene in and test the aesthetic and conceptual limits of intercultural performance on stages across the globe. While Klunchun, Chen and Rianto problematize the traditions within which they work, *Behalf* and *Medium* also problematize the implicit expectations for Asian performance on the global stage. I therefore align these processes of decay and composting with Haraway’s hopeful notion of stirring up “potent response[s] to devastating events”, as well as “to settle troubled waters” (1) and engender “unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles” (4). As local cultural climates transition, the artists discussed here harness the chaotic power of decay and the rich potential of this cultural humus to experiment in producing new works that can connect with contemporary audiences and build a transnational community of informed spectatorship.

Metaphors aside however, the troubles inherited by artists like Klunchun, Chen and Rianto are historical, persistent and complex. In both *Behalf* and *Medium*, artists work at disentangling traditional dance from its perpetual identification with imagined and idealized pasts. Klunchun suggests that public interest in the traditional arts is suspended vaguely between nationalistic identification and mild curiosity. National agencies are the primary funders for traditional forms like the Thai classical mask dance *Khon*—the tradition espoused by Klunchun—using it as a metonym for Thai national and cultural identity. Yet the bureaucratic nature of cultural management stunts the natural evolution of these forms, fossilizing them within overdetermined paradigms that no longer “communicate with audiences, don’t offer professional opportunities, and don’t sell tickets. So, no one thinks about its quality and meaning” (qtd. in Muto).

Yet traditional performing art forms continue to exist as cultural capital for the nation at the international level. This is apparent in contestations for the UNESCO description of Intangible Cultural Heritage, as both Thailand and Cambodia challenge the other’s claim that the

⁶⁶ I refer here to the notion of composting from Jennifer Mae Hamilton and Astrida Nemanis’s idea of composting feminisms, which I will refer to again later in this chapter. (501).

closely related masked dance forms, *Khon* and *Lkhon Khol*⁶⁷, are indigenous to Siamese and Khmer cultures respectively (Suvanatap, “Intangible Heritage”). Technical precision and conventions of performance are thus aggressively defended within traditional communities of practice to establish authenticity, cultural distinction and heritage value.

The field of Indonesian dance is also rife with the cultural politics of postcolonial nationalism. Matthew Isaac Cohen states: “Indonesia’s entire performing arts complex [is] a modern invention produced in the context of local and extra-local forces of colonialism, nationalism and dictatorship (Cohen, xx). Indonesian dancer Rianto resists the contentious opposition from religious and nationalistic factions to the cross-gender folk dance *lengger*⁶⁸, as I touch upon below in my analysis of *Medium*.

In seeking to detach from projects of nationalism and intangible heritage, networks of intercultural performance funded by international and state agencies have germinated in niches of experimentation that link various Asian cities—Singapore, Taipei, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Solo and Yogyakarta among them. In the last part of the chapter, I discuss an earlier phase of intercultural experimentation, beginning in the late 1990s, that seeded this transnational arts ecology, linking contemporary and traditional artists across South and Southeast Asia. The cultural and diplomatic efforts of state agencies in Japan and Taiwan had the effect of placing a handful of companies—most visibly Cloudgate Dance Theatre (Taiwan), Sankai Juku (Japan) and Dumb Type (Japan)—on the radar of venues in Europe and North America (Tang qtd in Iwaki). These two movements in the latter third of the 20th century—transnational intercultural engagement and international cultural diplomacy—have had the important effect of creating a globally dispersed, cosmopolitan spectatorship for Asian contemporary dance. Funding in the present-day context also often comes from cultural diplomatic institutions—the Japan Foundation, the Goethe Institut to name but two—while also trickling down from the cultural ministries of Singapore, Taiwan, Indonesia and so forth. These organizations fund small and large dance companies, festival platforms and residency projects.

The curatorial logic for these platforms flows from western intellectual and art circles, as programmers, producers and practitioners circulate in a transnational artistic community, brought together by large Biennales, performing arts conferences, symposia and festivals (Taylor, 2016). Contemporary performance emerging from Asia is thus processed at local, national and transnational level, emerging from messy entanglements of the local and global, of precolonial histories and neoliberal futures.

Gods, Spirits and Gorgons: In Search of Epochal Figures

Both *Behalf* and *Medium* have been produced as multi-year projects, transforming as they are repeated across multiple cities. As artists work to integrate the experience and wisdom of the past embedded in their respective forms with the emerging concerns of present and future generations, they run the risk of remaining unintelligible or unappealing to audiences in any one of these sites. The task at hand is to create work that is meaningful across multiple cultural

⁶⁷ *Lkhon Khol* is also spelled as *Lakhon Khol*, however for consistency, I have retained the spelling used in the article I have cited.

⁶⁸ I have refrained from capitalizing the dance form *lengger* throughout this chapter. This is in line with Indonesian dance writer Helly Minarti’s use of the term without capitalization in the two articles I have cited. Lysloff also refrains from capitalizing the term, though they use diacritics—*lénggér*—which I avoid here for the sake of simplicity.

contexts, so that Asian contemporary dance productions are often encounters between artists, stage, sound and light technicians, writers, academics and audiences from across the world who all carry their own forms of cultural knowledge and technical ability. The rhizomic network of contemporary Asian performance therefore facilitates such an “ecology of expertise,” which Aihwa Ong describes as a transnational, “high tension zone of constant cross-referral between recent pasts and projected futures, between rigidity and flexibility, between insiders and outsiders” (345).



Fig. 9 Rianto in *Medium*. Photo: Rianto

Such an ecology of expertise is exemplified by the transnational production teams behind both *Medium* and *Behalf*. As the frequency and duration of these encounters are limited by factors controlled at the level of state policy and global capital flows—including unpredictable changes in visa regimes, shifting logics of state and private sponsorship, evolving audience tastes and the seasonal cycles of arts institutions—this ecology of creative production is unstable. To me, the results of these experiments often strike the register of the uncanny, the open-ended and the unfinished, which is resonant with Haraway’s Anthropocene narrative; the archetypal figure she invokes for the Anthropocene is the mythic Medusa. Departing from the mechanical figure of the cyborg woman of the 1970s, Haraway now introduces this more gorgon-like creature for the coming age, born of tragedy, who is somewhat vengeful (unless greeted politely) (54).

Singaporean curator Tang Fu Kuen, who has been dramaturg for both *Behalf* and *Medium*, suggests that this open-endedness offers rich critical potentialities not yet manifest in its wider social fields. While arts institutions in Asia and Europe alike frame and reframe the labor

of the individual creators to fit seasonal aesthetic cycles corresponding with postcolonial, ethnographic, conceptual and performance “turns” in the western academic humanities, Tang argues that performance continues to carry its emancipatory potential in imagining new, alternate futures, regardless of its instrumentalization by neoliberal reasoning:

“Within critical arts discourse, I especially value experimental performance for its agency in proposing alterity; alterity [as opposed] to mimesis to represent bodies, forms and identities. Therein is the political will of performance. Not to represent known identities and ideologies, but to disrupt perceptions. To issue the reflexive possibility of identity change through action.” (Tang, “Curatorial Practice in Asia”)

Many dancers who experiment with the possibilities of altering their traditional forms strategically harness this disruptive potential of performance. Pichet Klunchun seeks to transform the Thai audience’s relationship with *Khon* dance, as they no longer identify with the moral paradigms that underlie local performance practices:

“Culture that was originally established for kings cannot be relevant in our time ... They originally developed as rituals for Buddhism, royal families, or other things. In the past, people in Indonesia or India didn't go to see "dance." The dancers were playing the roles of gods, and people went there to meet the gods.” (qtd. in Muto, “A Maverick Artist”)

Klunchun therefore pushes for *Khon* dance to abandon the gods, and accommodate the worldview of the rational, modern spectator. Similarly, as we will see in the case of *Medium*, Rianto adapts *Lengger* and *Kuda Kepang* performances for cosmopolitan audiences around the world, as local perspectives register cross-gender and trance performances as transgressive to established religious and social values. Yet, in adapting folk dance for the contemporary world stage, Rianto and his team of collaborators must contend with the presence (or absence) of ancestral spirits around which *Lengger* and *Kuda Kepang* performances were once organized. The creative teams behind *Behalf* and *Medium* are therefore tasked with resolving the profound contradictions of intercultural performance within a nomadic⁶⁹ arts ecology of intense interactions. While Klunchun and Rianto find limited local audiences who enjoy viewing open-ended, experimental work, they are also able to attract small, loyal pockets of spectatorship for cosmopolitan, experimental performance in cities across the world. These works therefore carry a quality of being as-yet unfinished, as artists continue to reorder their traditional techniques into mutant hybrids of various, cross-linked genres across each performance. My analyses of these works are thus limited by their evolving nature, as these works shift in minor or major ways at every performance.

Behalf: The Riddle of the Sphinx

⁶⁹ Here I invoke Deleuze and Guattari’s use of the term nomadic to characterize Asia’s arts network (21). I use this term to contrast the structured relationships between artists and state in many postcolonial Asian nations in the 20th century, with the transnational, non-hierarchized, shifting network of arts institutions and individuals that exist today.

In *Behalf*, produced between Taiwan and Thailand and sponsored by the National Culture and Arts Foundation of Taiwan, Haraway's gorgon, a mutant creature of odd kinship, is a central feature (Fig. 4). A large, gilded papier-mâché statue of a fully grown, headless stag stands under the stage light, its molded musculature gleaming. Framing and dividing the stage into two equal halves, three strips of black, crushed velvet curtains fall like columns from ceiling to floor, creating a double-window picture frame within the proscenium. Later, Chen explains that the curtains are a throw-back to traditional Chinese theatre sets, literally framing the Asian bodies of this work as being trapped within outdated, orientalist paradigms.



Fig. 10. *Behalf* featuring Pichet Klunchun (right). Photo, Etang Chen

A string of vintage “Edison” bulbs hang at various lengths, like rain drops frozen in midair. Downstage, on either side of this curtain frame, stand two small, rectangular boxes with an iPhone propped up on each of them. From stage left, Chen Wu-Kang walks in, wearing a tank top and bicycle shorts, in shades of olive and army-fatigue green. From behind the curtains, someone wearing an oversized mask peeps in cautiously. The mask is reminiscent of the traditional mask of Thai *Khon* dance but is remade into a likeness of the dancer Klunchun, who is evidently the mask-wearer. He is dressed in a long, deep-green hoodie and loose knee-length pants over runner's leggings.

The piece follows a conversational format. We watch a wordless, danced conversation in five acts, which the audience is left free to decipher on their own. Each of the five segments is

abruptly terminated by alarms emanating from the iPhones, chafing in their familiarity and rude in their interruption. Time between segments is punctuated by the flickering of the electric bulbs, twinkling soundlessly like stars. It is a casual atmosphere, devoid of the formality and convention that is widely expected of traditional Asian dance.

Alternately, Klunchun and Chen perform freestyle segments while the other waits and watches. They stage a conversation on casting off the protective layers of classical ballet and traditional dance technique, as both dancers expertly manipulate and tussle with elements of their clothing. Early on, Klunchun tries to shake off the hoodie by wriggling his hands into and out of the sleeves and then pulling his body through the hoodie rather than the other way around. He then drapes the hoodie on the statue of the headless quadruped; it is now a shroud (fig. 4). The mask comes off after an elaborate dance, and as the segment closes, it lies on the floor, glittering like a flat, bejeweled skull.

In one memorable moment, Klunchun picks up his mask and engages with it dramatically, like a lover, dragging the mask-face over the length of his body, nuzzling it against his neck, holding it over his shoulder as he moves around the stage in a delirious dance. Following this, in a sudden movement, he jabs it onto the neck-stump of the headless stag. As a Klunchun-headed, stag-bodied sphinx is born, Klunchun sits beside the creature and with maternal patience tries to make it say his name: “My name is Pichet Klunchun. Pichet. Klunchun. Say Pichet,” he pauses, as if listening to this “baby” repeating after him and continues: “... Klunchun.” The innuendo of sexual reproduction is deliberate, even if too literal; elsewhere, Klunchun has commented on the sterile relationship that classical dancers have with their forms: “it’s like they simply marry their dances and show them off as beautiful wives, rather than making love to them and having babies who may not completely resemble them” (qtd. in Mahasarinand).

When asked about the significance of the animal in the talk-back session with the audience, Klunchun relates it to his experiences in Thailand, where *Khon* dancers are invited to perform on special, ceremonial days. “The dancer, the production, all of it is support[ed] by the government—the royalty—sometimes, not all the time, I feel, I [am] like a pet, they keep me like in a zoo [*sic*]. They feed me and they like [to] spoil me. But I am still in a cage all the time. And that’s why the deer comes to me. And that’s why I put my mask on the deer—because it is me.” Unlike the riddle of the mythical Sphinx, which demands an answer, here the riddle lies in uncovering the question. The answer is supplied in advance by Klunchun himself, and it is his own name.

The riddle that is posed in *Behalf* is the future of *Khon* dance when reframed by the global stage and viewed under a critical lens. In *Behalf*, dramaturg Tang Fu Kuen redeploys the casual, dialogue format of Jerome Bel’s *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*, the production for which both Tang and Klunchun are best known outside of Asia. Widely considered groundbreaking, this work remains provocative in its candid yet complex portrayal of the east/west, post-imperial/post-colonial politics of the performing art world (Kwan, “Even as We Keep Trying”, 185-201). In *Behalf*, this dialogic structure is maintained, though the negotiation of cultural and political economy is markedly different.

In the talk-back session, Chen and Klunchun describe how the piece developed between residencies in Thailand and Taiwan, in and out of studios, getting to know each other as artists, as members of families and communities, and their ideas on faith and religion - both hail from cultures suffused by Buddhist thought. Fundamental to *Behalf*, therefore, is an abiding sense that the two performers are friends and equals, although Klunchun, as a master of classical Thai *Khon*

dance, had to navigate a different set of challenges from the ballet-trained Chen, who was Principal Dancer in the New York-based choreographer *Eliot Feld's Ballet Tech Company*. As fellow-Asians however, they have both exceeded their respective national, cultural and racial positions to achieve autonomy and relevance in an international dance world that remains dominated by Euro-Western practitioners, forms and paradigms.

After the talk-back session, Klunchun and Chen suddenly launch into an unexpected coda—a performance of classical *Khon* dance. From behind the curtains, the unseen musician Cheryl Ong simulates a full *Khon* orchestra with a hybrid instrumental set-up of modern drums, traditional percussion instruments, gongs and bells. To me, witnessing Klunchun's mastery of *Khon* technique and performance was a lush, sensual feast. On stage, Chen walks around Klunchun with a mic and makes expert observations on the performance with the detached air of a zoologist observing an animal in its native habitat. He explains that this dance shows the God Rama in flight upon the mythical falcon Garuda, and points to the intricacies of bodily technique that represent turbulence, movement, and emotion in the narrative. "The best way to experience this dance is not to watch it, but to try it out." Yet, he says, tradition guards *Khon* practice closely; the choreography of this piece is a secret that is passed down the generations, from the master to a specially selected, worthy student. Yet who is the worthy student? Chen continues:

"Last year in Bangkok, I met a *Khon* master. I asked him, what if you cannot find the right master to give this dance to? What would happen to tradition? What would happen to secret dance? He said, he would rather it be disappeared [sic]."

To prevent this disappearance, Chen and Klunchun dismember and splice traditional *Khon* dance to reflexive, critical and conceptual performance.

Medium: Recovering Javanese Spirits on the Global Stage

On a pitch-dark stage thick with theatrical fog, a moving body is barely visible. A weak yellow light filters through, softly illuminating the contours of this body, revealing deep golden skin, rippling shoulder muscles and an acutely arched lower back. Facing away from the audience and as yet unidentifiable as man or woman, the body moves powerfully and sinuously, without identifiable technique. It emerges slowly into the light, like a primordial creature from behind a cosmic veil, to reveal dancer Rianto's lithe athletic body dressed in nothing but simple, black slacks. Atmospheric sound fills the theatre, as a low, whispering voice chants a mantra that begins with the words *èling-èling* - "remember, take heed," in the Javanese dialect *ngapakan*, invoking the *indang* or ancestral spirit to possess the body of the performer.

Medium (Fig. 5) in its current form is a result of half a decade of experimentation in Indonesian, Indian, German, Belgian and Singaporean dance studios. Dancer-choreographer Rianto, who goes only by his first name, is today a member of British choreographer Akram Khan's ensemble. Rianto is known for his technical virtuosity in several classical and folk styles of Javanese dance, as well as his own style of contemporary movement. His commitment, however, is to bring to the international stage a form of trance performance called *Kuda Kepang*⁷⁰, and the cross-gender style of *lengger* dance, native to his village of Banyumas,

⁷⁰ Kuda Kepang, also called kuda lumping or jathilan, is a Javanese cultural practice seen in various parts of Indonesia and Malaysia. Its origins are unclear. The use of a hobbyhorse is a key feature and is characterized by the

Indonesia. Rianto's efforts suggest that acts of reframing folk dances on the global stage offer the possibility of its recuperation locally, in its native context, as current religious and political paradigms in Indonesia threaten the survival of these forms. He is not wrong; writing in 2001, the ethnomusicologist Lysloff stated that by the 1980s, the practice of *lengger*—a type of erotic female performance with variants all over Indonesia, associated with public and private celebrations—had become largely taboo in respectable Indonesian-Muslim society.

From the mid-1960s onwards, diktats emerging from President Suharto's "New Order" Indonesia demanded that pre-Islamic, erotic, and animistic elements in Indonesia's folk performing art forms be traded off for reformed, state-sanctioned, "authentic" tradition. Performances of *lengger* and related forms, Lysloff argued, were reduced to spectral showings, "a recollection of 'what is not happening'" and "a memory of times past, prior to the 'culture effect' of the Suharto regime", that is, before village customs were domesticated by postcolonial projects of invented traditions (19).



Fig 11. *Medium* featuring Rianto. Image Source: Rianto

Medium was workshopped in multiple sites around the world between 2013 and 2015 before its fully-fledged production, premiering at the Darwin Festival 2016 (Minarti, "Rianto's 'Medium'"). During this multi-year process, the *indang* (ancestral spirit), it would seem, refused to become present before foreign spectators, failing to show up at residencies at the Attakalari

performer going into a trance by apparent spirit possession. The trance condition toes the line between the magical and the purely performative (see Hendriko and Effendy, 2019).

Center in Bengaluru, at Staatstheater Darmstadt, Germany and deSingel in Antwerp, Belgium. This situation improved in 2016, with a chance meeting with the musician Cahwati in Singapore—Rianto’s childhood friend, fellow Banyumasan native, trained musician and *lengger* dancer. The two then reset the choreography to the classical Javanese musical format of *teletur* and brought in Indonesian filmmaker Garin Nugroho as dramaturg. By the time of my viewing this performance in Singapore in 2018, Tang Fu Kuen and Japan’s Yasuhiro Morinaga had joined as second dramaturg and sound designer respectively.

Medium articulates a profound contradiction. It is rooted in and seeks to resuscitate *lengger* and *kuda kepang*, yet in reworking them for the contemporary global stage, many of its performance conventions, framing devices, and its ceremonial, religious and ritualistic implications have been cast away. *Medium* can thus be described as a project of partial recuperation, “staying with the trouble of inheriting the damages and achievements of colonial and postcolonial naturalcultural [*sic*] histories” (Haraway, 125). Indonesian performance scholar and curator Helly Minarti calls Rianto a transgressive figure, reviving *lengger lanang* (male *lengger* dancer who does female impersonation), a practice that had passed into obscurity by the mid-20th century (Minarti, “A Transgressive Body”). Recovering the essence of this tradition, it would seem, involves the kind of ‘tentacular thinking’ that Haraway attributes to the cross-generic, stitched-together string-figures of the post-Anthropocene age (5). In this case, the choreographer has mobilized the global network of contemporary performance, itself a tentacular formation, to salvage the remnants of obscure performance forms and grant them an afterlife on the world stage.

The most recent version of *Medium* in 2018 concludes a journey that began five years earlier as a project called *Body without Brain*—exploring the electric body of the dancer in trance. Workshopping it at the *Attakalari Centre for Movement Arts* in Bengaluru, India, Rianto was interested in studying the corporeality of the *lengger* dancer as a spirit medium, suspended between consciousness and unconsciousness, controlled yet uncontrolled, their physical capacities magnified by the intervention of the *indang* (ancestral spirit).

Medium is an evolved version of *Body without Brain*. For the greater part of the hour-long performance, Rianto holds the audience in rapt attention, supported by inconspicuous, atmospheric lighting, Cahwati’s stirring voice, and the beat of the traditional *gendang* drum. Throughout the performance Rianto materializes an array of dance styles, centered on a play of in-betweenness, across dichotomies of eastern and western dance techniques, and of gender. *Lengger* technique may be identified by the observant spectator as evident in the sensually arched hips and lower back. Classical styles of Javanese dance are invoked when Rianto slides into a powerful wide-legged stance and articulates precise wrist movements and footwork. Contemporary western dance—as far as it can be named as such—becomes apparent in segments of pulsating and decentered movement. At all times, the highly expressive and energetic performance moves dizzyingly between slowness and speed, motion and stillness.

In one memorable segment Cahwati, who remains in the shadows for the most part, steps into the light, still playing a stringed instrument, and confronts Rianto in a forceful, almost combative, duet (Fig. 6). I read Cahwati—or to be more precise the music she plays—as representing the ancestral spirit, in response to which Rianto slides into a trance-like state of chaotic, pulsating, still virtuosic movement. The spirits of central Javanese performance – the *indang* – thus become animate on the world stage. Or do they?



Fig. 12. *Medium* featuring Rianto (L) and Cahwati (R). Photo: Vojtěch Brtnický

Rianto's project to materialize the body in trance, overtaken by the *indang*, offers a limit-case for considering the potential for a truly comprehensive intercultural experience. Can the average, twenty-first century spectator in Singapore, Antwerp or Bengaluru truly feel the presence of the *indang*? Watching *Medium* in 2018, I was struck by Rianto's tremendous technical skill and exhilarated by the intense atmosphere of mystery and revelation generated by the production's careful amalgamation of performance and stagecraft. Though I have witnessed and participated in rituals involving spirit possession in my ancestral village in Kerala, a pragmatic education within the neoliberal knowledge economies of India, Singapore and the United States has thoroughly wiped out my ability to sense disembodied spirits, even in the context of theatrical performance. Klunchun hints at a similar sense of alienation that young Thai audiences in Bangkok display with regard to their own cultural dance forms, remarking that far from expecting dancers to materialize the gods, "they had never looked at traditional dance as something that can be beautiful or interesting. They just thought it was dull and boring" (Muto, 2015). While I found neither *Medium* nor *Behalf* dull—both stimulated curiosity, wonder and occasionally, a sense of deep aesthetic fulfillment—my thoroughly rational modern subjectivity remained disenchanted. In my opinion, the *indang* continues to elude the theatrical stage.

To access the “secret” of *Khon* dance and to sense ancestral spirits of lost cultural worlds, the intercultural endeavor must enter the contested realm of shared imagination, cultural memory and belief—in short, the realm of affect. If Asian contemporary dancers aim to preserve what is valuable in tradition for cosmopolitan spectators around the world, then their work of experimentation remains incomplete; the religious and metaphysical elements that ground traditional Asian dance in the plane of the transcendental remain as yet incommunicable. Retaining these elements is a matter of technical complexity and careful negotiation, as shown by the collaboration of practitioners with varied, specialist skills seen in *Behalf* and *Medium*. It is in assembling a global team of performance, stage, and visual design experts that Rianto’s body becomes an appropriate ‘medium’ for the *indang*. It is in adopting reflexivity and openness to the critical paradigms of conceptual art practice that Klunchun is able to prime his new audiences to receive the secret of *Khon* dance. Yet, if my response is any indication, there are limits to the efficacy of this type of performance without a shared cultural frame of reference—and this is true even for spectators like me, who identify as cosmopolitan, contemporary Asian subjects.

“Generic Engineering” Southeast Asian Performance

At this juncture I would like to locate the works mentioned in this article within an evolving continuum of intercultural performance emerging between the last two decades of the 20th century and the present day. Singaporean director and curator Ong Keng Sen (henceforth: K.S. Ong) inaugurated what I consider an era of “generic engineering” in the region, to resolve problems of cultural translatability emerging from the encounters between disjunctive cultural paradigms. K.S. Ong initiated the Flying Circus Project (FCP), an Asian intercultural performance series that had several versions all over Asia between 1996 and 2013. In its first phase, between 1996 and 2003, the FCP tested several low-stakes intercultural works, with participants from all over Asia, applying Richard Schechner’s theory of performance as restored behavior and the notion that all social and cultural practices could be deconstructed into “strips of behavior”—as bits of coded information akin to DNA⁷¹ (Schechner 35, 115).

I understand these workshops as attempts to generate performances that could affectively bridge the gap between divergent moral regimes—primarily the religious and the secular—that underpin traditional and contemporary practice. While the FCP has been criticised severely for its unequal hierarchies of power between third world and first world participants, and for Ong’s position as director and curator⁷², evolved versions of its methodologies and processes continue to inform contemporary Asian performance today.

Relevant to our discussion, both Tang and Klunchun were participants in FCP. in the 1996 and 2000 editions respectively. While I have not been privy to rehearsal sessions for either of the two works described here, in *Medium*’s talk-back session Tang offers a glimpse of the process of choreographic reassembly from behind the scenes. Choreography here involved

⁷¹ See Helena Grehan’s article on the Flying Circus Project, where she discusses the FCP 2000 edition in which participants aimed to produce “the future of ritual”, referencing Richard Schechner’s book of the same name (579). Also see Ong’s dissertation where the author cites Schechner’s “strips of behavior” and describes some of the processes that emerged from this provocation (48).

⁷² See Bharucha 2004.

deconstructing Rianto's embodiment of *lengger*, *kuda kepang* and various contemporary dance vocabularies into an assemblage of technical, formal and visual elements. For *Medium* the team developed a score, visually mapping movements across space, coding the emotional content of movement phrases in secular terms—as intensities, sensations and properties. By rendering culturally specific movement phrases as abstract elements—as strips of behavior—the technique of traditional dance is repurposed and made available for consolidating affective spectatorship beyond specific cultural identifications.

Another legacy of the FCP is the transnational network of funding and presentation that emerged as a result. Ong's micro-grant funding organization, Arts Network Asia, germinated a rhizomic network of inter-Asian, as well as Euro-Asian capital flows, mobilizing international funding from the Ford Foundation and The Rockefeller Foundation as well as from national cultural agencies in Japan, Singapore, Cambodia and elsewhere (K.Ong, xi-x, 9). While funding has now diversified to include smaller institutions and presenting centers in both Europe and Asia, Ong's efforts activated nodes of an arts ecology that remains viable today. FCP successfully initiated a model of intercultural experimentation within the “international laboratory,” as K.S. Ong names it, for propagating and testing cross-generic forms of contemporary Asian performance (16). This model continues to remain salient, as evinced by the production histories of *Medium* and *Behalf*.

However, the logic by which these international agencies fund performers is contingent upon diverse political agendas that fluctuate unpredictably, intensifying the precarity faced by artists. Additionally, these short-term projects can do little to counter the waning of interest in *Khon* and *lengger* audiences in Bangkok or Banyumas. While these works and artists might gain international recognition, it is as yet unclear if these successes have remedial effects on the survival issues faced by their respective dance forms.

It is apparent that Klunchun and Rianto are suspended within the anticipatory logic of neoliberalism: they must calculate the risks involved in uprooting their traditional forms from local performance contexts, even as they test the potential for partially recovering these forms as cross-generic mutants that can survive as mobile, abstracted forms circulating globally. As regional cultural futures are shaped by institutions of state and market inflected with neoliberal reasoning, precolonial cultural practices continue to morph into unexpected, uncanny and gorgon-like string figures that retain little of their original coherence.

How do Singapore-based traditional dancers respond to and adapt to this new ecology of Southeast Asian performance? In the following section, I offer two cases: first, an institutional case in *Dance Nucleus*, a project conceptualized and seeded by the Singapore National Arts Council, best characterized as a research and development facility for cross-fertilizing traditional, popular and novel forms of regional performance. Here, quick, iterative experiments appear as half-lives of traditional dance as it decays in a quietly imploding nuclear fission. The second case, *Chowk Productions*, rigorously engages with traditional *Odissi* dance as it grows out of invented scripts of Indian nationalism, and into Singapore's shrinking microecology of intercultural theatre. Both cases are deeply entangled with the capital flows and institutional nodes conducted and cultivated by Singapore's arts and culture bureaucracy, intent on positioning the city-state as the cultural hub of southeast Asia, artificially seeding a thriving and complex arts ecology from what was once widely known as a ‘cultural desert’ (Wee). I centralize the adaptive moves made by practitioners of the Indian dance form *Odissi*—minor in Singapore's burgeoning arts ecology—as instances of stringing along, proliferation and

‘symposium’ that Haraway offers as models of creative boundary-breaking without evisceration of what came before (125).

Metaphors of composting and nuclear fission—while bleak in affect—work here to counterbalance the horticultural growth metaphors that are embedded in Singaporean policy rhetoric. Aihwa Ong discusses the potent mix of biological, horticultural and neoliberal economic rationalities that have informed state planners between the late 20th and early 21st century following the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-98. Transitioning ‘from authoritarian task master of the 20th century to venture capitalists,’ in various domains of governance, the role of state arts funding is to serve as an ‘invisible gardener’ of neoliberal governance who fertilizes, contours and supports arts-projects or practitioners, rather than as the ‘invisible hand’ of classical liberal economics. This mythic gardener envisions a tropical canopy, a baroque ecology characterized by free movement of technical and managerial expertise across national borders, then recombined and processed within institutional settings (A. Ong, 179-180). Arts industry juxtapositions of the same logic has translated into a project of fostering a Singaporean ‘Renaissance’, characterized by state investment in the arts, inaugurating new arts research and presenting institutions that catalyze what Singapore based dance scholar Stefanie Burridge characterizes as intensified ‘regional networks of collaboration and cultural exchange’ (2017).

An aerial view of Singapore’s creative industries—the industrial connotation notwithstanding—does simulate the complex ecology of the tropical canopy. However, this horticultural language hides rot. Beneath the canopy, older performance genres of Singapore’s traditional dance forms register the shifts in the climate of cultural production as a slow-moving crisis towards senescence. As shifting funding priorities transform the traditional arts into compost that feeds the discourse of intangible heritage, new genres of Asian contemporary dance and conceptual performance have recently risen in prominence.

Composting Tradition in Contemporary Singapore

If, as art critic Lee Weng Choy suggests, the subject of a local Singaporean arts ecology is esoteric even to natives (1), the clusters of non-western, ethnic performing-arts forms, misnamed as the traditional arts, are even more so. Indeed, while several commentators have written about Singapore’s pre ‘Renaissance’ art world of theatre and visual arts as an evolved, politically resistant and sophisticated visual-arts and theatre avant-garde, nearly all writers on Singapore’s arts scene have failed to acknowledge the active co-presence and influence of the ethnic or traditional arts, other than to characterize them as a ‘site for multiracial fantasies’ (Chong, 2011, 62). Yet, as Jennifer Mae Hamilton and Astrida Nemanis suggests, ‘it matters what compostables make compost’ (501); it matters that the ground for Singapore’s renewed, glittering arts infrastructure and its nodal position in the world of transnational intercultural performance are nourished by the debris of both homegrown and imported dramatic art forms of its minority ethnic performing artists.

As reiterated earlier in this dissertation, genealogical qualifiers of race and ethnicity are conflated in Singapore with temporal qualifiers of tradition and modernity. The so-called ‘Traditional Arts’ in Singapore—Chinese Opera, Indian Bharatanatyam and Malaysian dance among them—are most certainly invented traditions brought to Singapore by successive waves of immigrants. Yet these performances of Singaporean ‘tradition’ themselves compost the debris of temple, court, folk and social dance abstracted from local communities in India and

Malaysia⁷³. Such histories of hybridization, as discussed earlier in this dissertation were supplanted by the fostering of little traditions, which having served twentieth century nationalist and Asian modernization projects, are consigned to discourses of protection and preservation intangible heritage. Today ‘Renaissance’ discourse described in Chapter 2 and elaborated on again in Chapter 3, reimagines the modern Singaporean as embodying Asian cosmopolitanism rather than tradition (Wee, 87), rendering many local arts practices are a vestige of a bygone era. Accordingly, its preservation for the sake of posterity and heritage, is taken up formally by the Traditional Arts Secretariat within the National Arts Council. In 2016, a slim total of \$23 million was allocated under the National Traditional Arts Plan ‘dedicated to improving the quality of productions, growing potential peak companies as well as increasing audience base and accessibility to the art form(s)’ (‘New Initiatives’ 2016). In 2018, state planners considered nominating Indian classical dance as an entry to UNESCO’s intangible cultural heritage list (Teo 2018), a move which was received with much distress by practitioners (Bhaskar). To cast a popular, intergenerational cultural practice with hundreds of active students and teachers as intangible heritage is to preemptively declare its endangered status.

Simultaneously however, arts policy planners also strategically invest in decay; ‘Major’ and ‘Seed’ grant schemes – venture capitalist models for funding the arts—motivates dancers of ethnic forms to tackle their impending obsolescence by innovating from tradition. In this ‘composted’ order of the traditional, I want to direct our attention to the multi-generic recombinations that thus emerge; a new generation of traditional dancers now seek appropriate homes for their experiments within existing categories of hybrid performance—the ‘Asian contemporary’, the conceptual and the intercultural.

Reclaim and Refusal

In May 2019, Odissi dancer January Low presents the early stages of her work, *reclaim-in-progress* at the Dance Nucleus studio/workspace (fig.1). Low is dressed in what appears to be yoga-attire: leggings and a drapey gray blouse that hits below her hips. Her appearance contrasts sharply with her public image as former principal dancer of *Sutra Dance Theatre*, a world-renown Kuala Lumpur based Odissi dance-ensemble. Low’s piece begins with a video, evidently shot on a smart phone that appears in portrait mode at the center of the projection screen. In the video, Low is in her kitchen and she prepares an elaborate, simmering, soupy dish. The setting of the video, which plays for just a few minutes, is a picture of urban domestic wellness: a young woman presides over her well-fitted kitchen and cooks a complicated Asian dish with apparent ease. Low works with oil, vegetables, meat, noodles, spice, herbs and water, with a calm, orderly artistry that can only come with prolonged experience and consistent practice.

The video ends rather abruptly, as the virtual Low on the projection screen fades and the real Low stands live before the onlookers. She begins a slow and elaborate stretching sequence. Low’s movements are supple and practiced, a mix of yoga and stretching that dissolve into lyrical, contemporary dance. Low’s shoulder-length hair often falls over her face, obscuring the facial expressions so central to traditional Indian dance. A low drone sounds over the speakers,

⁷³ Serving nationalist imaginaries in these other postcolonial contexts, such inventions of traditions have emerged at the expense of other minor communities of practice, including the criminalizing the rights of hereditary practitioners to perform (Kersenboom, “Nityasumangali”). Various authors also argue that these practices are tainted by respectability politics inflected by religious and class-based anxieties (Coorlawala, 2004, Van der Putten, 2014).

which eventually gives way to atmospheric music, alongside Low's recorded voice speaking variations of the following phrases:

*'I support you...that is why I bring you down
I love you... that's why I knock you down.
I support you... that is why you owe me everything...'*



Fig 13. Artist January Low in *Reclaim*, 2019.

Towards the end of the piece, which lasts for about 30 minutes, movements typical of Odissi emerge: the restrained and delicate undulations of the torso over still, controlled, hips. The *tribhanga*, or the three-bend-stance. The *chowka* – arms parallel to the floor, with bent elbows and open palms that face downward, and legs in a kind of *plié*, knees bent facing outward in a demi-*plié*, toes pointing to the front diagonal corners of the room, heels about a foot apart from each other. The piece ends here. As I watch this, conditioned by my own Odissi training, it appears to me as if Low is preparing for a day of Odissi dance practice in the studio, the daily ritual of awakening stiff and sore muscles that protest the relentless labor of dance-making which

often begins in childhood. Yet my expectation is abruptly cut short as Low finishes her piece at this point and the audience breaks into applause.

For those who follow Low on Instagram, culinary videos are familiar fare on her social-media account page, alongside snippets of her practicing Odissi, or engaged in body conditioning workouts. After exchanging a decades-long career at Sutra Dance for more domestic occupations as a wife and mother, Low now performs her expertise in traditional practices – southeast Asian cooking and Odissi dance – on her social media platform. She then metastasizes these mediatized performances as live performance on the Dance Nucleus black box. However, Low sidesteps Odissi altogether, staging only the routines that invest her with flexibility and strength. “To me, *reclaim* is a full acceptance of what my life has become,” Low says in the question-and-answer session, ‘Acceptance after ten years of struggle...a dancer’s career is so rushed, and a mom is always rushing her kids...so this was a way to take my time when my kids are not at home.’” The spoken word poetry featured in *reclaim* suggests the hidden transactions of power, labor and capital, that belie domestic, familial relations, particularly between spouses, parents and children.

In one sense, Low’s piece can be interpreted in the vein of Mierle Laderman Ukele’s maintenance art, centralizing the labor of maintaining and conditioning her body as mother, dancer and artist. It bemoans the loss of her Odissi practice to the invisible artistry of food preparation, the work of care in feeding and nourishing her loved ones, and significantly, the labor of sustaining her public persona as the exoticized classical Indian dancer. Yet, in another sense, Low’s stated acceptance of “what (her) life has become” takes on the affective register of refusal, the refusal to perform the practical mastery of the experienced Odissi dancer as well as a refusal to critically engage in its deconstruction in service of contemporary conceptual art. Low’s refusal is a performance of adjustment and preparation, as her artistic identity must comprehend and adapt to transforming artistic atmospheres in the region and her presence in Dance Nucleus can be understood when the transforming regional arts ecology is taken into consideration.

Making the Asian, Contemporary in Singapore

Early investment for dance by the Singapore National Arts Council were geared towards valorizing institutionalized dance companies—T.H.E. (The Hidden Element), Arts Fission Dance Company and Frontier Dance Land among them. These companies shaped themselves around the early 2000s model of the global, Asian-Contemporary dance company mentioned earlier, the Taiwanese Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, Japanese Sankai Juku, Thai Pichet Klunchun Dance Company being well known models for the genre. In the last two decades of the 20th century, the Asian contemporary dance paradigm consolidated around experiments by Asian choreographers to interweave a foundational western dance form – ballet, modern or contemporary concert dance—with Asian somatic and energetic practices (Kwan 2017: 41). Since the middle of the 2010s however, state funding for Singapore’s dance scene has decidedly evolved towards cultivating independent dance, away from large companies funded primarily by the state, and towards a microcosm of small-scale, seed-funded companies in Asian contemporary performance. This impetus has materialized in the founding of Dance Nucleus at the National Arts Council premises, a “practice-based research, creative development and knowledge production for independent / contemporary performance” (Dance Nucleus). Its founding artistic director, Daniel Kok relates that Dance Nucleus is modeled upon the Hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum Tanz (HZT) in Berlin (Kok, 2019). Dance Nucleus’ priorities also mirror those of the ‘new French scene’, with ‘reduced investment in institutionalized dance companies, and

increased support for improvisatory, adaptable and venue-specific works that are characterized by an acute reflexivity towards what counts as dance and why' (Kwan 2017: 41). The center therefore aims to be a pulsing node—the nucleus—of contemporary dance creation in Southeast Asia, positioning Singapore as a vital site along a transnational network that links with 'indie' dance scenes regionally and globally.

Kok considers conceptual dance—critical, reflexive and conversational— as offering a mediating language between the cultural, formal and linguistic silos of the regional dance scene that is linked to South, Southeast and East Asia. Rather than formal deconstructions of modern and postmodern dance, Kok suggests that form and technique might be the problem; Asian dance forms, especially those attached to notions of tradition and eastern classicism are stifled by the same technical exactitude that make them distinct. To quote Kok,

When you think about dance, sure you need to work very hard and train in a form to be able to be a dancer, you need to be able to choreograph dancing that genre...you are struggling so hard— like 'how do I break this boundary', 'oh no my guru won't allow me'— because you're keeping yourself a box...I don't care if you're from Bharatanatyam or baking or cross stitching...what are you working on? What is your question? (2019)

The nuclear connotation implied in the name is therefore not just descriptive, but imperative — to implode ritually guarded performance lineages, engaging instead with experimentation and cross-generic couplings that can produce unforeseen hybrids. As neoliberal rationality disembeds tradition, Kok suggests that the *guru* as its guardian must be disregarded in service of critical experimentation. While the earlier era of Asian contemporary dance involved fusion of various movement vocabularies, this new phase appears predicated on fission, to explode disciplinary boundaries, performing an emergent, liberal political consciousness and engage in critical questioning. The notion of choreography supported at Dance Nucleus under Kok's purview 'denotes processes of critical inquiry that problematizes the conventions of seeing, speaking, doing, and other modes of representation that give form to human politics, in order to proffer alternatives to received knowledge' (2020: 7).

To these demands, January Low's response seems to be a quiet but firm 'not yet'. Others, however, have already pushed forth. As a space for reflexivity, Dance Nucleus has amplified critical conversations among a new generation of local dancers, consolidating something of a theatrical public sphere around issues race, gender and sexuality in traditional, folk and classical dance. January Low's problematization of Odissi dance technique instead enacts a temporary refusal to engage, staging other daily rituals that nourish and give meaning to her artistic life. Her refusal may not be permanent; rather it is a pause that augurs the losses imminent in pressing ahead with Dance Nucleus's emancipatory vision⁷⁴. This vision, while fostering a vital, dialogic mediation of the cultural politics that undergirds traditional dance worlds, also makes manifest neoliberalism's drive towards deskilling and devaluing of older forms of knowledge. Low's scene of exhaustion and performance of recuperation can then be read as an impasse of adjustment (Berlant 2011: 7), as epochal shifts in the regional arts climate enforce new norms and standards for the labor of inventing and reinventing tradition.

⁷⁴ January Low has since staged reclaim as a completed work at KOTAK, Five Arts Centre, Kuala Lumpur in December 2019. The author has not viewed this work. The artist has described reclaim as 'the product of imposed self-care', and an 'in-depth study of the inner (invisible) world of an artist mother' (Low, 2021).

Dance Nucleus' project has attracted keen interest and served as a unique platform for choreographers whose experiments are considered excessive or reactionary by the old guard of traditional performance¹. Some key works in this vein shown at Dance Nucleus include Bharatanatyam dancer Nirmala Sheshadri's *The Problematic Danseuse* (2019), on the failure of Bharatanatyam cast upon the ageing female body, and *Pok!* (2018-2019) where Malay dancer Soultari Amin Farid, whose work I explored in detail in the previous chapter, considers the queer body in Malay traditional dance ('Soultari Amin Farid' 2020). Also explored in the previous chapter, Malay dance company P7:1SMA have also staged segments of their original works concerning the female performing body and shame (*Nak Dara* 2018-2020) and the constitutional enshrinement of religious orthodoxy (*What is the Point of Me?* 2018) among Malay communities of spectatorship in Singapore. The center attracts dance radicals from around the South and Southeast Asia with funded workshops and residencies, redirecting Singaporean capital to building strong circuits of knowledge and talent flows between organizations in countries which have little to no funding for experimental performance—*Gati Dance Forum* in New Delhi and the Indonesian Dance Festival among them. But decay in the nuclear sense is not the only possible response to the instability that traditional artists face in the midst of cultural climate change, as explored below.

Pallavi and Slow Death

Choreographed between 2015 and 2018, Raka Maitra's *Pallavi* series—*Pallavi & Space* (2016) and *Pallavi in Time* (2017), and *Pallavi with Stillness* (2018)—cites three works choreographed by the late Kelucharan Mohapatra, a towering figure in 20th century Indian classical dance and revered guru who lived and worked in the Eastern Indian state of Orissa (fig. 2). In each work of the series, Maitra explores the spatial and temporal aspects of Odissi performance, dialoguing with a single selected work from Mohapatra's opus, though this is neither intended to be a reconstruction nor a reprise. *Pallavi with Stillness*, the third work of this series staged at the Esplanade Theatre Studio in July 2018, features a diminished musical ensemble of three who replace the elaborate, four to six-person *pakhwaj* (traditional orchestra). They effectively erect the dense, musical atmosphere in which five dancers, Meera Gurusamy, Karishma Nair, Sandhya Suresh and Chloe Chotrani, along with choreographer Raka Maitra, move. This work exemplifies features common to the *Pallavi* series: a restrained and slow-moving reassembly of Mohapatra's original *pallavi*, that stages its slow erasure in the emerging transnational arts ecology for Indian classical dance.



Fig 14. *Pallavi with Stillness* (2018). Dancers (L-R) Chloe Chotrani, Sandhya Suresh, Raka Maitra, Karishma Nair and Meera Gurumurthy.

Pallavi in Sanskrit translates into ‘new leaves’ or ‘elaboration’, evoking the image of a tree sprouting up from a single seed and unfurling organically into lush foliage. A standard piece in the Odissi dance repertoire, ‘the seed’ of each *pallavi*—and there are several—is a single musical refrain, set in a particular *raga* or melodic framework. This refrain is improvised in rhythmic patterns of increasing musical and choreographic complexity, as the tempo accelerates and ends in an extended crescendo. As Mohapatra’s *pallavis* are now considered canonical to Odissi, deviation from the original choreographic sequence is received by the Odissi dancing community as an insult to tradition. Dancers thus imprint choreographies into memory and musculature through years of relentless practice, to ensure perfect recall and seamless flow.

In Maitra’s *Pallavi* series, this flow is attenuated to near stillness, even as Mohapatra’s choreography is disjointed and rearranged. Each segment is marked by distinct musical variations where particular movement phrases from Mohapatra’s original choreography are extracted, stripped down into its most fundamental phrases and elaborated on. The dazzling complexity of the original choreography is thus simplified into apprehensible fractions, as the dancers exaggerate each gesture as if caught in a slow-motion frame. Odissi’s key technical features are thus cast into sharp relief, especially the masterful isolation of the torso, eyes, shoulders and limbs which enables the split temporality between top and bottom segments of the body. As the feet, torso and limbs lag behind one another to create a staggered flow of movement, Odissi’s signature fluidity is materialized, invoking an image of water currents coursing at different speeds along horizontal sections of the dancer’s body. Maitra’s decelerated

and fragmented Pallavi then returns the attention of the distracted 21st century viewer back to genius and power of classical Odissi dance technique.

Unlike the traditional Pallavi however, the ‘leaves’ or segments do not unfurl organically; they billow and scatter, without a coherent structure. At unpredictable moments, dancers break away to face different directions, sometimes improvising asynchronously, sometimes in-tandem, without a definite, climactic end. As the piece ends, Maitra and her dancers abruptly stage a long coda, performing the complete version of the original Mohapatra’s pallavi without interruption. The coda, then, gathers the billowing, scattered leaves and momentarily resuscitates them into organic wholeness.



Fig 15. Pallavi through Abstractions (2020). Dancers (L-R) Caroline Chin, Raka Maitra and Sandhya Suresh.

Maitra’s *Pallavi* series anticipates the forgetting of classical Odissi in the near future of Singapore’s post-traditional arts ecology. The dancers apprehend fragments of Mohapatra’s choreography out of sequence, like fragments of an old memory already lost to time. The coda functions as a citation, as if to materialize the cohesive world in which Mohapatra’s choreographies are rooted, now disarrayed by turns of postcolonial migration, urbanization and rationalization of culture. A new, fourth work in this series titled *Pallavi through Abstractions* was screened in November 2020, as part of the COVID-19 era of virtual programming at the Esplanade Theatres Singapore. Markedly, Maitra and her dancers have discarded the elaborate traditional costumes this time around, opting for plain black slacks and tops. With this move,

Maitra aims to separate the exotic allure of costume and accoutrements from the essence of Odissi dance, which she insists lies in its technique (fig. 3).

Intercultural Mutations of the Traditional

Maitra engages with the waning of tradition in Singapore in a manner distinct from the nuclear model offered at Dance Nucleus. The parameters of this distinction are evident from her process off-stage and her professional history as a choreographer. Every day, the stomping footwork of Chowk dancers rehearsing Odissi technique and repertoire resounds around the environs of Emily Hill, where *Chowk Productions*, Maitra's dance company, was situated between 2012 and 2021. Located in the heart of Singapore but secluded atop a hill, Emily Hill has allowed Maitra to sustain choreographic experimentation that intertwine her Odissi practice within the homegrown niche for intercultural theatre in Singapore. In the early 2000s, soon after the shift towards the creative industries model for culture in Singapore, Maitra was selected as an associate artist at The Substation—Singapore's pioneering independent arts institution that has stood for the autonomy of the arts from the state since 1990 (Wee). Here, Maitra hybridized her Odissi training with her knowledge of Seraikela Chhau and Indonesian Wayang Wong, having trained in these forms in New Deli, India and Solo, Indonesia respectively. By the 2010s, Maitra's experiments in crafting a distinct contemporary dance vocabulary rooted in Odissi were intensified by her ties with the Intercultural Theatre Institute (ITI). ITI, formerly the Traditional Theatre Research Program was started by Substation founder Kuo Pao Kun and along with dramaturg and theatre critic T. Sasitharan in 2000, and integrates a curriculum in traditional Asian theatre practices for actor training, with semester-long 'training immersions' in four Asian theatre techniques — Kutiyattam theatre from India, Beijing Opera from China, Noh Theatre from Japan and Wayang Wong Opera from Indonesia, alongside various contemporary techniques from all over the world (Campi 2016: 342).

This pluralistic ethos has influenced Maitra's choreographies and the pedagogical process that her dancers undergo at Chowk. Since 2011, Maitra has nurtured a symbiotic relationship with ITI, renting an unused shed next door at the Emily Hill premises, the two institutes exchanging knowledges through workshops, master classes and training intensives. The corps of Chowk dancers emerging from this experiment are thus steeped in practices of diverse, yet related styles of movement rooted in traditional Asian dramatic forms. This long engagement has shaped Maitra's intercultural experiments, eventually evolving into her signature idiom of contemporary Odissi that emphasizes simplicity, stillness and critical reflexivity. Staying with the trouble of working with an imported, invented tradition, Maitra's career is characterized by efforts to meaningfully root her work in the microecology for autonomous artistic production that has thrived in Singapore, both in spite of, as well as in relation to, state intervention in the arts. To salvage what is valuable in traditional dance, Maitra has thus sought to create a traditional dancing community that is responsive to both continuity with tradition and changing with other communities of practice in Singapore. While the *Pallavi* series stages the slow death of Odissi, Maitra in fact conserves it within an extant habitat for intercultural performance that circumvents the State's 'choreographed entanglements' in local cultural production (A. Ong 180).

If the present era supplants the macro-project of national subject formation into proliferating, molecular processes, the project of the traditional arts within the particular context of Singapore is now void. Neoliberal rationality renders the performance ethnic difference for a

national, multicultural ideal as obsolete, in favor of a more flexible, market-friendly cosmopolitanism. In the local dance world, this translates as a waning demand for mastery in traditional dance technique in favor of creating work which has broader audience access. Indian classical and Malay folk dances, which once sought to link the ancient past and perpetuity for ethnic communities of practice and spectatorship, now undergo a second order of reinvention, to accommodate the near future of contemporary culture in Singapore. Dance Nucleus' 'nuclear' model usefully poses important ethical questions that culminates in the exhaustion of traditional dance technique as a possible way forward. Chowk's slower, sympoetic processes, on the other hand, offers the possibility of intensifying joyful mutations between traditional practices through intercultural experimentation, while retaining what is valuable in traditional dance technique. Expanding into unforeseen creative collaborations, traditional dance enters an evolving, expanded field of cultural production, where rhizomic paths of mutual sustainability emerge. Characterizing them as genres of acclimatization and adjustment, I offer this short study of minor experiments with traditional dance in Singapore as a possible image of things to come for dancing communities in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

To draw this dissertation to a close, I would like to leave the reader with some key ideas and concepts that have been brought together in this dissertation. I began this dissertation project in order to challenge a very old and very persistent notion that Indian classical arts espoused by the Indian diaspora— in Singapore and in various other sites of its practice globally— are 'traditional', spaces and practices that are not inflected by modernity. I then expand the frame of analysis beyond Indian dancers working in and around Singapore, to include Thai, Indonesian and Malay dancers, and identify experimentation and reflexivity as key to understanding how choreographers of traditional forms remain dynamic and relevant today. The colonial and entrepreneurial assemblages of governmentality and epistemology have persistent and pervasive social and political effects that reorganize dance techniques, poetic forms and performance conventions rooted in medieval temple, folk and court forms in postcolonial Asia, and consequently reshape the affective dynamics of dance-viewing and dance-making publics. Choreographers resolve these tensions through a process I call reassembly, a very simplified term that alludes to the many creative and pragmatic ways in which the technique and aesthetics of so-called traditional dances are repurposed to make the symbolic capital with which they are invested, fungible beyond their present-day national, cultural and temporal frames. The spatial dimensions of choreographic reassembly are transnational, while temporally, its processes span the time frame of several decades between the mid twentieth century to the present day.

Choreographic reassembly offers dance practitioners, analysts and administrators a lens that transcends temporal (traditional/modern), national (Indian/ Singaporean/ Thai, etc), cultural (sometimes indistinguishable from the "national" frame and therefore difficult to apply) frames, and instead suggests looking at dance practices as assemblages of elements—techniques, aesthetic and moral paradigms, social and political histories and ecologies of art production. Rather than simply view new choreographic experiments emerging in Asia as "contemporary Asian" or "intercultural" work, the interaction between standardized genres of the dance can be contextualized in relation to the situated ways in which choreographers respond to local social and political goals. In this dissertation, different dance works are viewed as experiments in

choreographic reassembly created by the kaleidoscopic reshuffling of all these elements by choreographers who flexibly recast their chosen dance forms for different ends.

Choreographic reassembly has a range of open ended and unpredictable effects and is exercised by practitioners for multiple objectives. In Chapter 1, I identify choreographic reassembly as having the effect of *surrogating* new icons for Indianness within the Singaporean multiracial milieu. Building upon analysis the Bhaskar's early choreographies detailed in Chapter 1, in Chapter 2 I identify that choreographic reassembly allows for fungible variations of "national" dance forms like Bharatanatyam, which have deep ties with postcolonial nationalist movements, to signify Singapore and Asia more broadly. In Chapter 3, a younger generation of Indian and Malay dancers reassemble their traditional dance forms with an anticipatory logic that can both critique the deep cultural and political conservatism of their respective communities and nation-state, while remaining legible within the frame of tradition for funding purposes. Chapter 4 rethinks "interculturalism" in Asian performance to instead focus on aspects of careful cross-generic experimentation by Indian, Indonesian, Taiwanese, Thai and Malay choreographers, as they recuperate what is valuable in their "traditional" practices while seeking to expand beyond the generic traditional frame. As creative practitioners engaged in solving complex cultural problems, I call choreographic reassembly at this level as *generic engineering*.

Is the notion of choreographic reassembly applicable beyond its instantiations in contemporary Southeast Asia? Indian diasporic dancers in the United Kingdom, United States and elsewhere are also engaged in dance experimentation, which scholars like Ananya Chatterjea and Ketu Katrak call 'contemporary' Indian dance. Might an eschewing of the temporal marker open up new ways to think through creative practice by the Indian diaspora in these various sites and tease out more precise understandings of their situated political goals, even as we continue to look at their work in relation to longer histories of classicism and tradition? On a related note, would choreographic reassembly as a lens also open up new dimensions to understand Asian contemporary and Intercultural collaborations in dance? Might notions of generic engineering, which centralizes choreographers as producers of embodied and performed knowledge, allow us to see intercultural dance work as more than the struggle to make incommensurate cultures and practices meet? Do generic engineering and choreographic reassembly allow both consciousness of the enduring effects colonial, postcolonial and neoliberal disruptions, while retaining focus squarely on dancer's efforts at envisioning, unforeseen futures for culture in their sites of practice? I leave the reader of this dissertation with these questions and look forward to the answers that may come.

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