UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
Los Angeles

Constructing Diasporic Identity Through Kathak Dance:

Flexibility, Fixity, and Nationality in London and Los Angeles

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance

by

Shweta Saraswat

2019

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor Anurima Banerji, Chair

This dissertation focuses on the role of the classical Indian dance form Kathak in negotiating questions of cultural identity and national affiliation among members of the Indian diaspora residing in London, UK, and Los Angeles, USA. This study considers how institutional actions and discourses related to the practice of Kathak dance in these two cities and the personal experiences of dancers themselves reflect certain political, aesthetic, and social values that impact the formation of diasporic identity. The dissertation argues that Indian diasporic subjects negotiate a fundamental tension through their practice of Kathak dance: the tension between Kathak's inherent flexibility and contextual conditions of fixity.

As described in Chapter 1, Kathak's inherent flexibility refers to certain foundational elements of the dance that center around creative interpretation, improvisation, and immersive practice (*riyaaz*), as well as the expression of multiple identities that these foundational elements enable. A discourse of Kathak's flexibility frames the dancer's transcendence and/or transformation of socially assigned identifications as an act of aesthetic virtuosity with cross-cultural significance. However, the transformative potential of Kathak's flexibility is limited by contextual conditions of fixity that include material and discursive frameworks that fix Kathak to singular narratives of Indian nationalism and curtail the breadth of flexible identifications for both the dance and its dancers. The crystallization of Kathak as a classical dance by the Indian government in the post-independence era and the position of Kathak within a globalized regime of affect that essentializes the dance as a marker of Indian national identity have contributed to fixing Kathak dance as a practice upholding dominant Indian cultural narratives and logics. Forces of flexibility and fixity affect both the dancer and the dance form; this study looks at the identity negotiations of the dancer alongside the adaptive shifts of the dance form to illuminate the transformative effects of both flexibility and fixity over time and place.

By laying out Kathak's flexible potential against the limiting conditions of fixity, this dissertation explores two dominant strategies that shape Kathak discourse and practice towards different socio-political ends: the heritage model and the integrative model, both of which encompass different alignments of dance repertoire, pedagogy, and political strategy by dancers and institutions. As described in Chapter 2, the heritage model practice of Kathak aims to empower Indian diasporic subjects by underscoring their difference from the dominant British or American classes and enforcing hegemonic notions of Indianness through a fixed practice of Kathak. Drawing from Annette Weiner's work on inalienable possessions, this study offers a

new theory that casts Kathak in the heritage model as an inalienable *practice* ontologically tied to a singularized Indian national identity, Hindu practice, and idealized, often patriarchal *guru-shishya* (teacher-student) lineages. Conversely, the integrative model frames Kathak as a tool for intercultural encounters, utilizing the dance's inherent flexibility to create new pathways for Kathak dance and dancers to enter and/or converse with British and American national culture. As described and complicated in Chapter 3, these include an exploration of individuality through original choreographies and creative interpretation, a conscious development of new points of access for audiences, an insertion of Kathak into nationally relevant public spaces, an engagement with multi-ethnic dancers, and an adoption of Western contemporary aesthetics.

Grounded in multi-year fieldwork in the Kathak communities of Los Angeles and London, this interdisciplinary project brings together institutional case studies, choreographic analysis of Kathak techniques and compositions, ethnographic field notes, and data from individual interviews together with theories from critical dance studies, cultural anthropology, and cultural geography. It highlights Kathak dance as an aesthetic and political praxis to illuminate the processual nature of constructing cultural and national identity in the Indian diaspora.

The dissertation of Shweta Saraswat is approved.

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This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of Professor Polly Nooter Roberts,

a woman of grace, strength, and limitless love. Thank you, Polly.

Constructing Diasporic Identity Through Kathak Dance:

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I must acknowledge the many men and women whose words and practices make up the foundation of this dissertation. Though there are too many to name, I thank them all for the time they took to speak to me, the honesty they brought to all of our conversations, and the trust they put in me to represent their stories. Nothing in this dissertation matters without the life that these dancers and advocates bring to the practice of Kathak around the world. I hope I have represented their voices with the same integrity and sincerity they bring to their practice of this art form.

I would like to particularly thank all the women in London who welcomed me into their dance community with such generosity. In addition to the time they gave for interviews and conversations, these women made me feel at home in a new city by cooking *ghar ka khana* for me, for sharing space with me in their studios, for dressing me when I had not even a *gajra* to wear for performances, and who cared for me like a friend, not a researcher. Thank you especially to Dhiya Arora, Deepika Kathrani, Amun Bhachu, Janaki Mehta, Raksha Taylor, Neeraj Sharma, and Suruchi Saxena.

Thank you to the staff and volunteers who offered key institutional knowledge and logistical assistance at all the organizations I engaged with over the course of this research, particularly the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London, Akādemi, the Leela Institute for the Arts, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the School for Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, the Southbank Centre, the Sonia Sabri Company, and Kalashram. This project would not have been possible without financial support from the UCLA Graduate Division, the UCLA Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance (WAC/D), and the UCLA International Institute.

I must also thank the Alliance for California Traditional Arts and the Getty Museum for employing me even as I worked on this dissertation. These professional opportunities reminded me of the relevance of my research outside of traditional academic settings and a provided a life-giving glimmer of post-Ph.D. life.

Thank you to Ann David from the University of Roehampton and Navtej Purewal from SOAS for helping me get situated to the dance scene in London. To Royona Mitra of Brunel University, thank you for not only engaging with my research questions with enthusiasm and encouragement, but for talking deeply with me about how this work is inseparable from our lives and the lives of our loved ones. Thank you also to Pallabi Chakravorty of Swarthmore College, whose seminal research and writing on Kathak dance and modernity served and continues to serve as a model for my research and dance practice.

I am very grateful to my incredibly gracious and patient doctoral committee members whose trust spurred me on in shaky times. Thank you to Susan Leigh Foster for her monumental work in the field of dance studies, and for her attention to and validation of my tiny contribution to the field. Thank you to Lionel Popkin for his lively energy and fresh takes on Kathak and choreographic practice. Thank you to Janet O'Shea for stepping on board during a difficult time and for embracing my project with enthusiasm and rigor. And a deep thank you to Al Roberts and Polly Nooter Roberts. In addition to their thoughtful engagement with my research questions, I am most grateful for the simple love I felt from both of them throughout my entire time at WAC/D, and still feel. Thank you both.

I have been incredibly lucky to have Anurima Banerji as my committee chair. She has been a model figure for me at a formative time in my life, setting an example of how to approach research and art with rigor and generosity, and how to value one's own voice. I left every

meeting with her feeling refreshed, clear, and confident thanks to her patient engagement with all of my ideas, needs, and fears. She first inspired me when I was a vague undergraduate at UCLA back in 2011, showing me a whole world of study that spoke to me on a level that I didn't think was possible. It took a few years for me to make my way back to WAC/D to pick up that thread, but when I did, Anurima was there with open arms. She has energized this dissertation from the start.

I am also very lucky to have been thrown into this PhD program with four incredible cohort members: Amy Alterman-Paradiso, Arushi Singh, Mika Lior, and Shamell Bell. I can't describe the moving discussions, the laughter, the tears, the confusion, the fears, and the triumphs we've all shared. From the beginning I saw a conviction in these women I wanted to cultivate in myself, and this remains the biggest source of strength throughout the PhD process. Thank your reading my writing, for talking about my ideas to absolute death, and for making me feel like I could do this. I am inspired by the way you all walk the walk, and I am deeply grateful to have shared this experience with the four of you. Thank you also to my colleagues and friends Johanna Kirk, Archer Porter, and Jingqui Guan for their steady stream of encouragement, and for their friendships that have grown from sharing articles to sharing life. I am also grateful to the security and good energy of our graduate student spaces at WAC/D, and to the department staff who have always brought an infectious brightness to their work. Thank you providing such a wonderful environment to grow in.

Thank you to all of my non-UCLA friends who have remained patiently supportive of me even as I disappeared into the writing hole for months at a time, and for welcoming me back into the sunlight and reminding me of the rest of my life in times when I had dissertation tunnel vision. I want to especially thank those few close friends who truly saw the good, the bad, and

the ugly sides of this Ph.D. process and responded with attention, understanding, and unconditional support. They each spent chunks of their lives pulling me out of existential angst—without them I would not have made it this far. Thank you Arushi Singh, Evan Sullivan, and Wafa Azeem for being there, always.

Thank you to the soft security blanket that I fell back on nearly every weekend: my incredible cousins Deepshikha Upadhyay, Ishaandeep Upadhyay, Jaideep Upadhyay, Divyadeep Upadhyay, Suchit Upadhyay, Ashwin Ojha, and Ishita Ojha. The lightness of heart I feel when I am with them is an irreplaceable feeling that I somehow have been lucky to have since childhood. My cousins in Canada and India—Preeti Pandit, Amit Saraswat, and Akash Saraswat—though farther away, have always buoyed my spirit with their encouragement and perspective. Thank you all for being there, for staying close, and for keeping it real.

My brother, Prashant Saraswat, has been a source of sanity (and hilarity) my entire life. He read my work, kept me laughing, brought me food, filled in the blanks when I wrote so much I forgot how to speak coherently, and basically was always there for me. I can't say more than that, because nothing will capture what he does for me every day. I love you Bhaiya.

My aunt and Kathak guru, Rachana Upadhyay, is the origin point for this entire work. In an incredible stroke of luck for me, she married into my family and raised me in art form I would have never come into contact with otherwise for more than twenty years. Because of her, dance has been a constant in my life, a foundation to how I understand and interact with the world and with myself. Her fundamental and truly humble appreciation and respect for all artists, styles, and histories of Kathak has set an example for my own research and study. Her incredible dedication to this art form, the risks she took to begin teaching in a new country, the ground she broke as a community leader and arts advocate, continues to energize my own work in the field.

Thank you for investing in me, for encouraging me to spread my wings, for listening to me mouth off and throw my opinions around, and for grounding my theoretical work in a real dance practice. And more than anything, thank you for all the opportunities you created for me to dance, dance, dance. You are living this work, I am blessed that we are together in this. I love you Rachana Maami.

Most importantly, I am thankful to my parents. They have given me a life in which I can reach for anything. Their work, sacrifice, and love has enabled my every privilege, my every idea, my every possibility. For decades they sustained my dance, driving me to class, wrangling my hair into braids, tying my ghungroo for me, doing every tiny thing so I could move through dance and through life with ease. Thank you for enabling my every step in life, for giving me the space to figure out what I wanted and needed to do with my life, for leading me here, and for supporting me without question. This work stands on your shoulders. I love you both so much.

Here at the close I must acknowledge that all paths I have walked lead back to the precedents of my grandparents—my Baba, my Dadi, my Nani, and my Nana, who was the first in the family to work his way to a Ph.D. from UCLA back in 1983. I love you all.

And finally, thank you to my beautiful and inspiring home of Los Angeles, and the richness of life here.

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Introduction

Setting the Stage: Kathak Dance in the Diaspora

This dissertation focuses on the role of the classical Indian dance form Kathak in negotiating questions of cultural identity and national affiliation among members of the Indian diaspora residing in London, U.K., and Los Angeles, U.S.A. I consider how institutional actions and discourses related to the practice of Kathak dance in these two cities and the personal experiences of dancers themselves reflect certain political, aesthetic, and social values that impact the formation of diasporic identity. I show how Indian diasporic subjects negotiate a fundamental tension through their practice of Kathak dance: the tension between Kathak's inherent flexibility and contextual conditions of fixity.

By Kathak's inherent flexibility, I am referring to certain foundational elements of the dance that center around creative interpretation, improvisation, and immersive practice (*riyaaz*), as well as the expression of multiple identities that these foundational elements enable. I argue that certain tenets of flexibility are embedded into Kathak as a form, and these tenets allow dancers to transform or even exceed the fixed categories of social identity that define their daily life through the practice of Kathak. These tenets are part of the dominant discourse about what the main values, goals, and techniques of Kathak are. Constructed and circulated in multiple domains including training, performance, and representation, a discourse of Kathak's flexibility frames the dancer's transcendence and/or transformation of socially assigned identifications as an act of aesthetic virtuosity with cross-cultural impact and significance.

This transformative potential of Kathak's flexibility is limited by contextual conditions of fixity. These include material and discursive frameworks that fix Kathak to singular narratives of

Indian nationalism and curtail the breadth of flexible identifications for both the dance and its dancers. The crystallization of Kathak as a classical dance by the Indian government in 1952, the value of "authentic" Kathak practice transmitted through protected lineages[1], and the position of Kathak within a regime of affect that essentializes the dance as a marker of Indian national identity globally have all contributed to fixing Kathak dance as a practice upholding dominant Indian cultural narratives and logics. This kind of fixity can be reinforced from the top down when static categories of cultural identity resulting from politically-inflected racial formations are superimposed onto Indian diasporic subjects through state policy and national culture in the diasporic contexts of the U.K. and the U.S.[2] These fixed identity categories can also emerge from the bottom up, as diasporic subjects struggling with feelings of "unsettlement" invest in the phantasm of fixed, shared origins to achieve a sense of mooring amidst the unstable diffusion of peoples and cultures in the transnational sphere.[3] Both cases point toward the construction of contextual fixities in which "multiplicity, contradiction and instability of subjectivity is signified as having coherence, continuity, stability."[4]

By laying out Kathak's flexible potential against the limiting conditions of fixity, this dissertation explores two dominant strategies that shape Kathak discourse and practice towards different socio-political ends: what I call the heritage model and the integrative model. The

[1] As I will explore more in this Introduction and the chapters to follow, different styles of Kathak were developed and transmitted through hereditary lines of practitioners. While female hereditary practitioners were responsible for much of the development of Kathak dance in the 19th and 20th centuries, political movements against female expressions of sexuality and power marginalized these female dancers in the history of Kathak dance. Male hereditary practitioners who could trace lines of inheritance over many generations were lifted up by the Indian state and cultural elite as the favored bearers of the form.

[2] Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial formation in the United States*. Routledge, 1968.
Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant acts: on Asian American cultural politics*. Duke University Press, 1996.
Banerji, Anurima. "Legal invention of an artefact: birth of identity in Asian America." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2002): 4152-4163.

[3] Mankekar, Purnima. *Unsettling India: Affect, Temporality, Transnationality*. Duke University Press, 2015.

[4] Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of diaspora: Contesting identities*. Routledge, 2005. Pg. 124.

heritage model of Kathak aims to empower Indian diasporic subjects by underscoring their difference from the dominant British or American classes and enforcing hegemonic notions of Indianness through a fixed practice of Kathak. The integrative model utilizes Kathak's inherent flexibility to create new pathways for Kathak dance and dancers to enter and/or converse with British and American national culture. Institutions like local South Asian cultural centers, government funding bodies, and Indian classical dance schools, companies, and production houses are the backbone of these models. As brokers of economic, cultural, and social capital in diasporic communities, these institutions are key to determining how Kathak is used to reinforce or contest the limits of national identity in the U.S. and the U.K., thereby determining whether the dance is legible as fixed or flexible.

The heritage model and integrative model of Kathak practice—theories grounded in my fieldwork and illustrated in this dissertation by institutional case studies, choreographic analysis of Kathak techniques and compositions, ethnographic field notes, and data from individual interviews—encompass different alignments of dance repertoire, pedagogy, and political strategy by institutions. Individual Kathak dancers align with *and* disrupt these institutional efforts. Kathak dance and Kathak dancers are shaped by these multiple and conflicting interpretations of identity, and become implicated in sustaining these interpretations through their involvement with institutions and policies that either cement fixed notions of national identity or make efforts to complicate those fixed notions through an engagement with Kathak's flexibility. A key methodology of this project is to investigate the role of Kathak dance at the nexus of individual practice and institutional interests on a comparative geographic basis, looking at how dancers interpret their identities through the individual act of dancing and training *while* they navigate and invest in organizational frameworks and broader discourses of racialization, heritage politics,

debates around national belonging in London and Los Angeles. I approach this project from the position of a second-generation Indian American born and raised in Los Angeles, where I have engaged in a diasporic Kathak practice under my aunt and guru Rachana Upadhyay[5] for more than twenty years. I myself have been deeply embedded in these discourses of dance and nationality as part of my development as a diasporic Kathak dancer and as an American citizen.

This project illuminates the processual nature of constructing cultural and national identity in the Indian diaspora, and highlights Kathak dance as an aesthetic and political praxis. The Kathak art form itself has evolved and continues to evolve in response to conditions of fixity and the variable exercise of flexibility. In this way, the diasporic experience of Kathak dancers and the trajectory of Kathak as an art form have many conceptual parallels. Forces of flexibility and fixity affect both the dancer and the dance form; looking at the identity negotiations of the dancer alongside the adaptive shifts of the dance form in the same study can illuminate the transformative effects of both flexibility and fixity over time and place. As I will show in the pages to come, the practice of Kathak dance is foundationally tied to questions of national and cultural identity. I frame Kathak today as a flexible, diasporic form practiced by flexible, diasporic subjects amid changing conditions of fixity. The theories of flexibility and fixity I lay out in this dissertation are not only relevant to diasporic expressions of Kathak—these tensions exist in the practice of Kathak in India as well. However, I focus on flexibility and fixity in diasporic Kathak practice to underscore how the minoritarian positioning of this art and its practitioners within the national cultures of the U.K. and US can both amplify the political and

[5] Rachana Upadhyay is the founder of the Kathak Kala Academy dance school and the Indian Performing Arts Center nonprofit organization, both based in the San Fernando Valley in the suburbs of Los Angeles. I came under her tutelage in 1998 at the age of 7, and have been training in Lucknow style Kathak with her since then. The precedents Upadhyay set as one of the first Kathak practitioners and teachers in this part of Los Angeles has been an inspiration for this study on diasporic Kathak dance.

social stakes of Kathak practice and catalyze new approaches to engaging with flexibility and fixity.

SECTION I: Kathak Dance and a History of "Suitable Adjustments"

Kathak in its current form is a concert dance from north India drawing from techniques and aesthetics developed over centuries from a myriad of sources including both Hindu and Muslim devotional practice, royal entertainment, courtesan practice, Sanskrit scriptures, and Western classicism. After India gained independence from the British empire in 1947, the new state government declared Kathak a classical dance of India.[6] In this section, I will lay out the major milestones and developments in Kathak's history, showing how these historical turns point toward Kathak's flexibility. First, it would be helpful to consider the main techniques of the Kathak form as they exist today.

Like many of the other classical dances of India, Kathak combines *nritta* (abstract movement including footwork and compositions that focus on line and rhythm) with elements of *nritya* (stylized storytelling through mime and codified gestures). Yet Kathak stands out from the other classical dances in many ways. On its surface, Kathak bears visible markers of the Indo-Persian influences that permeated north Indian cultural life as from the 13th century onward[7]: the upright comportment and soft lines of Kathak dancers are distinct from the squats, bends, and

[6] Kathak was one of four dances to receive classical dances to first receive classical status; the other forms were Bharatanatyam, Manipuri, and Kathakali. As of 2019, there are eight official classical dances including Kuchipudi, Mohiniyattam, Odissi, and Sattriya.

[7] The Indian subcontinent, and north India in particular, has a long history of dynasties and empires founded by traveling conquerors. These include peoples of Turkic, Mongolian, Persian, Arab, and even Greek origins, resulting in the development of a complex and many-layered north Indian cultural identity that is distinct from south Indian cultural identity. See Subrahmanyam and Alam (2000), Dale (2009), Burbank and Cooper (2011).

sharp angles common in some south Indian dance practices; Kathak costumes[8] and instrumentation have been shaped by trends in Muslim court culture[9]; and the performance of Kathak often takes on an improvisational, almost casual format that alludes to the intimate salon performances of *tawaifs* (courtesans) and other court entertainers. Kathak is also heavily steeped in a logic of circularity[10] which is reflected in a cyclical understanding of time, in the reciprocal and continuous exchange of energy and emotion between performer and viewer, and in Kathak's quintessential movement, the *chakkar*: rapid spins executed on the heel, derived from the Sufi trance practice of whirling.[11] Kathak as we see it today is a syncretic dance made up of a variety of cultural traces, and is ontologically tied to both Hindu and Muslim aesthetics and spiritualities. The fundamentally syncretic quality of Kathak defies homogenized notions of Indian national culture that equate "Indian" with "Hindu" and cut out the contributions and relevance of a multitude of other cultural practices and aesthetics. Unlike the other Indian classical dances that

[8] Kathak's signature costume of the *angarkha* or *anarkali* (tunics with long sleeves and voluminous, calf-length skirts) paired with *churidar pyjami* (tight-fitting trousers with gatherings of fabric at the ankle) and a long scarf (*dupatta)* for women, is a distinctly Indo-Persian outfit that differs greatly from the variations of the *sari*, the single piece of long fabric paired with a midriff-baring blouse that is common in the south Indian classical dances. When rendering storytelling pieces that focus on Hindu mythology and Hindu religious practice, Kathak dancers may wear full length skirts known as *lehengas* with blouses and dupattas, while men may wear *dhotis*, a single piece of fabric wrapped along the waist and legs to form billowing pants. It is important to note that the angarkha-anarkali-pyjami combination is often described by dancers as a "Muslim" or "Mughal" costume, while the lehenga and dhoti are described as Hindu clothing, suggesting that even in a fundamentally syncretic form like Kathak efforts are made to distinguish and separate Hindu and Muslim aesthetics and historical traces.

[9] The pair of *tabla* drums and the *sarangi*, a string instrument that has been described as something between a fiddle and a lute, are the two signature instruments of Kathak dance. Both instruments have Persian roots, and the sarangi in particular is associated with Muslim court culture and courtesan practice (Bor, 1986). Kathak dance can also be accompanied by the harmonium, sitar, sarod, *bansuri* or bamboo flute, and vocalists who all play in the Hindustani classical style (as opposed to the Carnatic classical style of south India). Kathak also utilizes the two-sided *pakhavaj* drum, which has a deeper sound than the tabla and is used for particular types of vigorous compositions called *parans*, but much of the pakhavaj repertoire is now rendered on the more readily available tabla.

[10] Rowell, Lewis. *Music and musical thought in early India*. University of Chicago Press, 2015.
Lewis Rowell notes that "among the most powerful pressures on the arts of India have been cultural preferences for the circular disposition of space and the cyclical disposition of time" (Rowell 2015, 180-181).

[11] Friedlander, Shems. *The whirling dervishes: being an account of the Sufi order known as the Mevlevis and its founder the poet and mystic Mevlana Jalalu'ddin Rumi*. SUNY Press, 1975.
According to Shems Friedlander, the Sufi mystic Jalalu'ddin Rumi employed whirling as part of the devotional practice among the Mevlevi order of dervishes in the 13th century C.E. Since then, whirling has continued to be a practice of prayer and meditation among some Sufis (Friedlander 1975).

claim a firm Hindu heritage, Kathak is built on a multiplicity of cultural influences that comes through at the level of comportment, costume, music, technique, and repertoire, as I will explore throughout this dissertation.

The Dance

What is considered "traditional" Kathak repertoire today is comprised of a mixture of rhythmic compositions and expressive sections arranged into an evening-length solo presentation.[12] While larger-scale group performances of Kathak abound both in India and around the world, I focus this dissertation on the idealized notion of a solo Kathak performance practice that defines the dominant discourse around the dance. In this kind of traditional performance, repertoire items play out against a continuous rhythmic cycle known as the *taal,* progressing from slow tempo to fast. Sections of *nritta* that focus on rhythmic play and the execution of abstract movements through choreographed compositions that are in conversation with the rhythmic cycle are interspersed with sections of *nritya*. Nritya mixes nritta movements with representational or poetic expression drawn from drama, or *natya*. In the expressive storytelling part of Kathak, solo dancers can embody multiple characters and types to share stories typically from Hindu mythology and scripture, but also from other sources such as non-Indian cultural material and situations from contemporary life, as I will explore in the chapters to come. Storytelling is facilitated through the use of *abhinaya*, or a mimetic language that, in Kathak practice, mixes codified gestures and facial expressions with more quotidian movements drawn from the realities of daily life. As Royona Mitra describes it, "*Kathak's* reliance on the modality of *abhinaya* […] makes it a form that renders meaning in motion, evoking a stylized

[12] The arrangement and progression of what is now considered "traditional" Kathak repertoire was constructed by influential figures in 20th century India, as I will describe in Chapter 1.

human reality on stage".[13] Expressive dance in Kathak is centered around the creation of *rasa*, or a shared emotional experience between dancer and audience generated through evocative performance.[14] In Chapter 1, I will study how the Kathak dancer navigates the process of rasa development and structures of rhythm (taal) through various techniques of flexibility embedded in the repertoire.

In her 1967 text *The Theory and Technique of Classical Indian Dancing*, Kapila Vatsyayan has shown how Indian classical dance is considered part of a larger practice of drama as laid out in the *Natya Sastra,* the seminal Sanskrit text on dance and drama attributed to the sage Bharat Muni and dating to sometime between the 2nd century BCE and 2nd century CE.[15] According to Vatsyayan, the theories and techniques of what we understand as a semi-discrete category of dance are foundationally tied to theories and techniques of dramatic practice, signaling the foundational storytelling impetus of Indian dance that is combined with the rendering of sculptural forms that display balance, symmetry, and stillness (Vatsyayan 1967, 230-233). This can be understood broadly as the balance between expressive nritya and abstract nritta.

However, Kathak diverges from Vatsyayan's broad analysis of Indian dance in some important ways. Vatsyayan describes Indian classical dance as a highly sculptural form that places great emphasis on poses and stances; she goes so far as to describe Indian dance as "a stringing together of a number of highly stylized and symbolic poses" (Vatsyayan 1967, 232). While arrested postures are important to some parts of Kathak—particularly at the moment of *sum*, or the high point of the rhythmic cycle, as I will describe more in Chapter 1—Kathak on the

[13] Mitra, Royona. *Akram Khan: dancing new interculturalism*. Springer, 2015. Pg. 37.
[14] I will offer a detailed description and analysis of rasa as an aesthetic theory in Chapter 1.
[15] Vatsyayan, Kapila. "The theory and technique of classical Indian dancing." *Artibus Asiae* 29.2/3 (1967): 229-238.

whole is not defined by sculptural posturing. Rather, I argue that Kathak is more concerned with the variation of movement *between* postures, where the journey through a rhythmic cycle is richer than the ending pose or stance. In this way, Kathak is preoccupied with "the very fine and deliberate manipulating of time," but not in service of achieving the perfect pose, as Vatsyayan claims (Vatsyayan 1967, 233). This enjoyment and exploration of the time *in between* poses or moments of stillness is where Kathak's flexibility can be exercised within the parameters of the rhythmic cycle. This in-between space is where improvisation and creative interpretation happens.

Still, the repertoire of Kathak poses and stances offers important insights into what defines the Kathak body and quality of movement. Kathak is not built around symmetry and equal balance, the way Vatsyayan describes. Rather, the Kathak dancer generally balances their weight on one side of the body or the other. For example, in a basic standing posture the dancer may stand with the right foot balanced on the toes behind the left foot, which is flat on the ground and carrying more weight. Another variation would find the right foot outstretched at a 45° angle away from the body, either to the front or to the back, with the left foot again flat on the ground and carrying most of the weight. Both of these stances can be shifted so that the weight lies on the right foot and the left foot is poised for action; however, the form dictates that all movement that starts on the first beat of the rhythmic cycle begin with the right foot and/or the right hand, invariably orienting the dance towards the right.[16]

Space is divided into a series of lines that depart from the body at increments of 45°. For example, the right arm can be outstretched straight forward at 0°, or diagonally to the right at

[16] In the common 8-beat footwork pattern, for example, the first beat is rendered through the Kathak syllable of *ta.* Patterns and compositions that start with *ta* must begin with the right foot and/or the right hand, without exception. These movements are often then mirrored by the left foot and/or left hand on the syllable *aa*, the counterpoint to *ta*.

45°, or straight out to the right at 90°. This applies to the vertical axis as well, where the hand can be stretched out straight above the dancer at 0°, straight in front of the dancer at 45° (roughly level to the dancer's forehead), straight in front of the dancer at 90° (shoulder level), straight in front of the dancer at 135° (roughly level to the dancer's pelvis), or straight in front of the dancer at 180° pointing directly at the floor. Of course, Kathak is not taught in terms of degrees and precise angles; rather, this division of space is communicated through a language of diagonals and corners. Sometimes these diagonals are described in terms of points on a circle that surrounds the dancer, and indeed Kathak choreography often traces the arcs between these points in sweeping gestures of the arms and feet. Most Kathak movement aligns with diagonal vectors that favor the front right.[17] The one important exception in this diagonal orientation is the presentation of footwork, which often begins with the body oriented to the front and the feet flat on the ground, slightly turned out and sharing equal weight. However, long segments of footwork generally end with the right foot extended outward to the right and the body angled towards the front right corner. The weight is entirely on the left foot, with the big toe of the right foot softly touching the ground.[18] Variations of patterns within a single footwork section can also be marked by a change in the dancer's orientation; for example, it is not uncommon for a dancer to perform one part of a three-part footwork sequence (*tihai*) oriented on a right diagonal, the second part on a left diagonal, and the third part facing forward.

In terms of the relationship of the dancer to space, I have seen an increased concern with covering stage space during performances on large proscenium stages that threaten to swallow

[17] I do not have evidence to explain why Kathak is so often oriented toward the front right, but I would hypothesize that because musicians traditional sit to the right of the dancer, movements towards the front right acknowledge the presence of musician and audience together.

[18] Another common ending position is similarly oriented toward the front right angle, but with the dancer leaning inwards and placing all the weight on the right foot, leaving the toes of the left foot grazing the ground.

the solo dancer. Choreography is often reformulated to suit these large performance spaces that are easily double or triple the size of the studios and home spaces where Kathak is taught. Beyond concerns about performance venue, Kathak is not overly concerned with covering large amounts of space. Rather, entire programs can unravel within a very small quadrant of the stage, some necessarily so as the dancer must remain close enough to listen to and communicate with the accompanying musicians. In this way, Kathak is differs from forms like Western ballet, which Vatsyayan describes as striving to "eliminate space by covering as much of it as possible, whether it is floor-space or space in the air" (Vatsyayan 1967, 232).

The lines of the body itself and the comportment of the limbs is noticeably soft and slightly curved in Kathak. The limbs are almost never fully extended or hyper-extended, and the elbow and wrist always remain soft. However, the entire limb is energized, with the very tips of the fingers active even as they appear relaxed. Energy travels to the limbs from the stable core of the dancer, which remains highly engaged and grounded throughout the dance. The stability of the core enables the floating arms and nimble feet of the Kathak dancer, as well as the powerful yet effortless appearance of the *chakkars* or spins. The strong core also allows the Kathak dancer to maintain an upright comportment that is very different from the half-squat that is common in many south Indian dances. In Kathak, the feet are grounded but the weight doesn't reside in the thighs or bent knees—this frees up the feet for more intricate and deft movement. The core of the Kathak dancer allows the rest of the body to be fluid and flexible.

In terms of abhinaya, or gestural storytelling, Kathak is much more flexible than the other classical Indian dances. Vatsyayan describes the articulation of the hands and fingers as the key mechanism through which stories, symbols, and feelings are expressed in Indian dance, citing philosopher Nandikesvara's dictum that "where the hand goes the eyes follow; where the eye

goes, there the mood (*bhava*) follows, and where the mind goes there arises sentiment (*rasa*)" from the *Abhinaya Darpan*, another ancient Sanskrit treatise on drama and movement composed by the 10th century (Vatsyayan 1967, 236). This is partly true in Kathak, which engages with a series of single and double hand gestures to communicate certain images, symbols, or feelings. Kathak also follows the basic rule of following most hand movements with the eyes, reinforcing the importance of the hands as signifiers. However, unlike the other classical dances, Kathak is not rigidly codified. It does not always adhere strictly to the exact gestures laid down in the *Natya Sastra*. Unlike Vatsyayan's claim that "there is no attempt […] to present things as they are" in Indian classical storytelling that is preoccupied with coded gestures and their pre-assigned meanings, I am suggesting that Kathak dancers often weave in new articulations of the hands and other parts of the body to create images that fall somewhere between codified gestures and quotidian movement, creating what Mitra called "stylized human reality" (Mitra 2015, 37). This lack of a strict adherence to codified movement is part of what makes Kathak a flexible dance, as I will show in greater detail in Chapter 1.[19]

The Kathak dancer is able to move between abstract movement and representational movement, between codified gestures drawn from Sanskrit treatises like the *Natya Sastra* and the *Abhinaya Darpan*, more informal gestures and mimetic movement drawn from daily life, and between traditional progressions of repertoire and creative juxtapositions of compositions. Unlike many of the other classical Indian dances, Kathak is an *"anibandhanrtta"* or an unbound dance; it is "flexible in both form and content within broadly specified frameworks of aesthetic

[19] I have offered these descriptions of general Kathak technique and bodily comportment based on my own observations and experiences as a Kathak dancer over the last twenty years. This description of Kathak is my interpretation and understanding as it relates to questions of fixity and flexibility in Kathak practice.

purpose."[20] The *anibandha* or "unbound" category of music and dance was described in a 16th century text called the *Nartananirnaya* by the scholar Pandarika Vitthala.[21] Madakranta Bose has hypothesized that the flexible category of anibandha dance was referring to Kathak as it existed in the 16th century. She argues that "Kathak represented in its early days a new principle of design […] unlike other styles, Kathak does not prescribe in detail the movements it employs" (Bose 1992, 214). The flexibility of Kathak's structure and the freedom of the dancer to move within that structure puts this dance in a special category of the unbound.

But there are edges to Kathak's formal flexibility. I argue that Kathak is fixed to the foundational structure of taal and the overarching mandate to create rasa. In this way Kathak falls in line with the other classical Indian dances, which Vatsyayan described as adhering to "a series of laws applied systematically […] with a view to evoking a particular state of mind or *rasa*," (Vatsyayan 1967, 237). The goal of creating rasa is the same across forms, and the means through which the dancer attains that goal is contained within a fixed rhythmic structure. These two elements, in my estimation, are what Bose referred to as the "frameworks of aesthetic purpose" that mark the outermost parameters of the dance (Bose 1992, 213). In Chapter 1 I will show how taal and rasa act as points of departure that both enable and limit Kathak's flexible expression. Here, I will take a moment to showcase how Kathak's transformations over time reveal the dance's unbound flexibility.

[20] Bose, Madakranta. "Bandha and Anibandha" in *The Traditional Indian Theory and Practice of Music and Dance.* Edited by Jonathan Katz, Brill: 1992. Pg. 213.
[21] Sathyanarayana, R. *Nartananirnaya of Pandarika Vitthala.* Edited by Kapila Vatsyayan. Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts: 1994.

A History of Transformations

Kathak was given iconic "classical" status in 1952 by the Indian government as part of the independence-era nationalist project. Through the classicization process implemented by the Sangeet Natak Akademi, India's national performing arts agency, the cultural elite of the time decided that Kathak and a handful of other dances were to be singled out as emblems of Indian national identity in the aftermath of colonial oppression. This connection to Indian nationalism defines and haunts Kathak today, particularly in the Indian diasporic setting. Because of its association with Indian national identity, learning Kathak is an interdisciplinary endeavor that encompasses lessons in language, history, theology, mythology, philosophy, social etiquette, gender norms,[22] and other culture-specific beliefs and practices that are transmitted through the body. The affective[23] nature of this embedded Indian nationalism is in many cases a key feature around which Indian diasporic identity evolves, as will be explored in Chapter 2.

However, the discourse of singular nationalism that surrounds Kathak's classical status obscures a long history of how the dance has responded to changing conditions of patronage, religious trends, and political shifts leading up to the present day. Here I will offer a brief history of the dance to showcase some of these twists and turns in the life of the dance. In outlining some key moments in Kathak's development over the centuries, I am not attempting an objective or comprehensive history of the dance. Rather, my account embraces unequal elements of myth,

[22] This dissertation focuses primarily on Kathak dance and its relationship to cultural and national identity; it is not the explicit purpose of this project to interrogate the relationship of between Kathak and issues of gender and class. However, I do recognize that questions of gender and class are embedded within any discussion of nationality and dance. Those questions emerge at key moments in this dissertation, but for a detailed analysis of Indian classical dance, nationality, and issues of gender and class, see Chakravorty 2008, Mitra 2005 and 2006, O'Shea 2007, and Meduri 1996.

[23] In my study, I use the word "affect" to refer to the emotionally-charged intensities and responses related to identity that have been socially constructed, rather than pre-structural, unconscious experiences described by scholars such as Brian Massumi. I draw primarily from Asian American Studies scholars Purnima Mankekar (2015) and Shu-Mei Shih's (2005) work for this structural understanding of affect.

legend, and oral history that may or may not have been debunked by critical historians but that nevertheless remain key to the popular narratives shaping the present-day identity of the dance. In doing so, I demonstrate the relevance of the discursive history of Kathak to questions of contextual fixity and limited flexibility. As Margaret Walker observed,

> along with the postures and gestures, the repertoire and the footwork, kathak dance students also absorb a narrative about their dance, what it used to be and where it came from […] the connection of the dance to ancient Hindu practices has become so entrenched that it interferes with scholarship and critical thinking about not only history, but also power structures, class and caste questions, and gender issues.[24]

The origin story of Kathak that has circulated most widely describes an ancient dance practiced by traveling *kathakars* (storytellers) more than 3,000 years ago. This story has been passed on in Kathak oral tradition as well as in many scholarly treatments of the dance.[25] What this narrative is missing is the detail of how, in those intervening millennia, the precursor to modern Kathak morphed and responded to changing contexts. It obscures the fact that the classical dance as we know it today is the product of an inherent adaptability, an "in-built resilience" that I argue points towards the dance's basic flexibility.[26] As Walker points out, "in the move from feudal empire to British colony to independent nation in less than 300 years, India's traditions have needed to constantly adapt to changing politics, patronage, and philosophies" (2014, 279). I touch on just a few moments of Kathak's history to demonstrate

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[24] Walker, Margaret E. *India's Kathak Dance in Historical Perspective*. Ashgate: 2014. Pg. 5.

[25] Indeed, Walker offers a hefty list of books and essays replete with un-confirmed descriptions of ancient Kathak dance practice: "More than 30 books, essays, and articles in English and Hindi about *kathak* (included Vyas 1963, Devi 1972, Vatsyayan 1974, Dadhich 1981, Khokar 1984, Kothari 1989, Simha 1990, Rao and Chandrabhaga 1993, Narayan 1998, Massey 1999, Natavar 2000, Raghuvira 200, Sinha 2000, and Srivastava 2009), not to mention hundreds of Indian dance websites, tell and retell the chronicle of the ancient storytellers, the decay of their art form, and its eventual revival" (Walker 2014, 5). I would mention here that my training in Kathak dance imparted the exact same history, passed down from my guru's guru, Dr. Puru Dadhich (sometimes spelled Dadheech), who is included in Walker's list.

[26] Kothari, Sunil. *Kathak, Indian classical dance art*. Abhinav Publications, 1989. Pg. 221.
I'll note here that Kothari used the phrase "in-built resilience" to refer to Kathak's ancient value that he claims persisted over time, while I am re-interpreting his phrase to signify Kathak's resilience as a flexible and adaptive dance form that changed over time.

both its flexibility in making "suitable adjustments" to changing contexts, and the pervasive fixity of the discourse around how the dance is described despite these moments of flexible development.[27]

As there are very few sources that critically interrogate the slanted historiography of Kathak, in this section I rely heavily on the pivotal work of Pallabi Chakravorty[28] and Walker that reveals some of the ways Kathak's ancient history was strategically constructed and circulated by members of India's intellectual and political elite as part of the nationalist project. I couple their work with my own interrogations of the historical narratives that have been orally passed down to me from not only my own dance guru, but through countless encounters with teachers, performers, students, and cultural administrators over the last two decades of my Kathak practice. Many of these themes of authentic antiquity circulate with powerful force in the diasporic settings of my research, where I have been scrutinizing the effect of narratives of classicism in the context of national identification among diasporic Indian subjects.

In the following visitations to a series of historical phases featuring different iterations of Kathak, I am not offering a neutral history of the dance nor a neutral summary of its formal quality and techniques. Instead, this section addresses the developments in Kathak history and repertoire as part of a larger theoretical argument about flexibility and fixity that questions the perceived linear progression of the form from ancient religious celebrations to the modern concert stage. I briefly touch on the ways Kathak has responded to changing socio-cultural conditions in both form and discourse, leading up to its classicization in the mid-20th century. In

[27] Vatsyayan, Kapila. *Indian Classical Dance.* Publications Division Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, 1992.
[28] Chakravorty, Pallabi. "*Bells of change: Kathak dance, women and modernity in India*." Seagull: 2008.

Chapter 1, I will examine the full story of how classicization fixed the dance into its present position as a nationalist cultural icon in India and the Indian diaspora.

Ancient Storytelling

The discourse around Kathak's apparently ancient roots centers on the mention of the words *katha*, *kathak*, and *kathakar*, in Sanskrit texts dating as far back as the 4th century BCE, all referring to a class of traveling bards and performers who related mythological stories to public audiences (Narayan 1998, 8-9; Kothari 1989; Venkataraman 2004, 44; Massey 1989, 73). These rhapsodists have been linked to the Brahmin caste group also called Kathaks, hailed as the ancient family lineage through which Kathak dance was passed down.[29] Narayan summarizes the oft-repeated origin story of Kathak's religious, patriarchal past:

> It appears that Kathak, as the name suggests, originated in the Indus-Gangetic belt where the brahmins (priests) while recounting stories based on Hindu mythology reached the point of ecstasy in their devotion which manifested itself through the medium of dance. This dance form danced by the Kathakas or Kathaks in the ecstasy of their devotion was called Kathak derived from the word 'Kathakar' (story-teller) and 'katha' (story).[30]

Walker offers a thorough analysis of the etymology and usage of these words throughout the centuries, concluding that the key Sanskrit words in question most likely referred in the literal sense to stories (katha) and storytellers or narrators (kathakars) (Walker 2014, 36-39). She also investigates the lineage of the Kathak caste group, determining that the categorization emerged in the 18th and 19th century as an attempt by its members to claim ownership over a certain kind of performance art and authenticate their identity as Brahmin[31] culture-bearers in

[29] Vyas, D.G. "Kathak Dance and the Classical Dance Tradition of Northern India." *Papers from the first dance seminar, 1958*, special issue of *Sangeet Natak*, edited by Sunil Kothari, 47(1-4), 2013, pp. 126 – 133.
[30] Narayan, Shovana. *Rhythmic echoes and reflections: Kathak*. Lotus Collection, 1998. Pg. 9.
[31] In the caste hierarchies of ancient India, Brahmins were privileged members of the highest caste. The conception of the moral and spiritual superiority of Brahmins persists in Indian caste politics today.

contrast to the less-respectable dancing girls of the same era (Walker 2014, 84-88). While Kathak dance through the ages has included a storytelling element evident in expressive repertoire items like *gat bhav*, to suggest that mentions of broad terms such as "story" and "narration" in ancient texts points towards an ancient presence of Kathak dance is a conscious stretch of the imagination. The connection between present-day Kathak, Sanskrit texts, and a centuries-old caste group has been forcefully claimed for decades as part of a larger project to connect the dance with ancient, Brahmanic roots. I'll explore this construction of authenticity in Chapter 1, which looks at Kathak's formal classicization and the rewriting of Kathak history it entailed. Kathak's purported ancient history is best understood through the lens of India's independence campaign and nationalist movement, which used the dance to summon the glorious vision and evidence of the nation's rich precolonial past.

There is one more key milestone in the history of dance and drama in ancient India: the writing of the *Natya Sastra* by the sage Bharat Muni sometime between the 2nd century BCE and 2nd century CE. It is worth mentioning here that while the text is attributed to Bharat Muni, many dance and music practitioners understand the *Natya Sastra* to be the fifth Veda, or sacred text, written by the god Brahma[32] himself, firmly placing Indian dramatic tradition in line with Hindu practice. Today there is an ongoing debate about whether the contents of the text ultimately represent secular or religious knowledge. Essentially a manual for the performance of music, dance, and drama, the *Natya Sastra*

> examines in detail every conceivable aspect of production: the ideal playhouse, metrics, prosody, diction, intonation, types of characters and appropriate costumes and make-up, the representation of sentiments…movements of every limb, the setting and construction of a play, the conventions of time and place, and even the canons of criticism and

[32] Brandon, James R., and Martin Banham, eds. *The Cambridge guide to Asian theatre*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

assessment.[33]

The text grew into the defining document of what is now recognized as classical Indian music and dance. Its value is not only theoretical or historical; the presence of the *Natya Sastra* in contemporary Kathak practice is "active, oral, and corporeal. It is present in performers, their teachers, and their performances," rather than in particular formal references to the *Natya Sastra* as a book.[34] The discursive relevance (or irrelevance) of the *Natya Sastra* to Kathak dance in the Indian diaspora will continue to be examined in forthcoming sections of this dissertation. As I will describe more in Chapter 1, linking dance practices to the *Natya Sastra* became a way to establish both the allegedly Hindu character of Indian classical dance as well as its pre-colonial roots.

Dance and Devotion

In the 6th to 8th centuries CE, India was swept from south to north by the Bhakti movement, a "progressive anti-caste and anti-brahman position, rising as it did against the hierarchical, ritual-centered, caste-based, patriarchal regime of a Sanskritized Vedic culture" (Chakravorty 2008, 36). The movement broke down caste hierarchies in religious practice of Hinduism, suggesting instead that individuals have the ability to reach or experience the Divine without the intervention or mediation of Brahmin priests.[35] Vaishnavism, or the worship of the god Vishnu and his avatars, particularly his incarnation as Krishna, flourished during the Bhakti movement. Krishna was the people's deity; his "warm human qualities made it possible for people to identify with him without feelings of blasphemy or sacrilege. His mischievous audacity

[33] Massey, Reginald, and Jamila Massey. *The dances of India: a general survey and dancers' guide*. South Asia Books, 1989. Pg. 6.
[34] Schechner, Richard. "Rasaesthetics." *TDR/The Drama Review* 45.3 (2001): 27-50. Pg. 28.
[35] See: Pechilis 1999, Haberman 2001, Sharma 1987.

evoked delight not fear, love not awe, and so lent itself admirably to presentation in dance form" (Massey 1989, 75).

A parallel movement that took place in the Islamic tradition was the emergence of Sufism, which, in opposition to orthodox religious tenets, places the body as the key tool through which one can achieve union with the divine, resisting the authority of the mosque or religious authorities in negotiating a relationship to the divine force.[36] In both movements, dance and song were incorporated as a "conduit for uniting with God," notably in the example of the movement meditation of whirling dervishes in the Sufi context, and in *ras lila* in the Hindu context (Chakravorty 2008, 36). Ras lila[37] involves the dramatic retelling of stories surrounding the life of Krishna, the central figure in north Indian Bhakti philosophy. The mischievous but endearing Krishna represents the ultimate "personal, domesticated god, engaged in lila or divine play in the role of a lover […] represented by the divine symbol of Krishna and his soulmate Radha" (Chakravorty 2008, 36). In its visual and corporeal iconography, ras lila is represented as a group of dancers dancing in a circle around the central figures of Radha and Krishna. Thus, both the Sufi and Bhakti iconographies incorporate the motif of the circle in performance.

Songs and poetry from the Bhakti period feature rhythmic *bols* or syllables that are part of Kathak's language today, and the themes of romantic love and divine union (the *sringar rasa*) became a cornerstone of Kathak's storytelling aspect through the Mughal period and into the present day. Chakravorty also notes that Bhakti poetry "has strong parallels with the longing for union with god in the image of an intoxicated lover or a lovesick maiden expressed in the poetry and teachings of Sufi mystics such as Amir Khusrau and Jalaluddin Rumi" (Chakravorty 2008,

[36] See: Bashir 2011, Frembgen 2012, Friedlander 1975, Eryaman 2011.
[37] Ras lila is still in practice today, though it has a distinct dramatic and theatrical character that is very different from modern Kathak (Kothari 1989, 145-148).

107). During this period, the role of Sufism and Bhaktism was to help individuals access a sense of the divine through their own intimate spiritual encounters, often facilitated by the meditative and celebratory act of dancing.

Presenting at the first Dance Seminar held in New Delhi, India, at the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1958, D.G. Vyas took Kathak's relationship to the regional dances performed on dhrupad and kirtan music during the Bhakti period as evidence of Kathak's essentially religious character, decrying the secular iterations of Kathak that emerged as religious tides shifted in north India. According to Vyas, "dance blossomed under the impetus given to it by Vaishnavism and is, in its style, technique and forms, pure Kathak" (Vyas 2013, 129). In his estimation, Kathak is fundamentally tied to Vaishnavism and the regional worship of Krishna that took hold in the Bhakti period. Indeed, many Kathak teachers today create dichotomies between Kathak and the classical dances of south India, differentiating between what they call the dance of Krishna (*natwari nritya*) in the north and the dance of Shiva in the south. The fundamental rhythmic syllables of Kathak—*ta*, *thei*, and *tat*—have been[38] attributed to the sounds made by Krishna's feet as he danced atop the head of a demon snake in one of his many adventures as a young child.[39] Kathak's discursive ties to Vaishnavism and the physical practice of devotion have persisted from the medieval era to the present day.

Dance in the Royal Courts: Birth of a Syncretic Form

Beginning in the 1100s CE, waves of Turco-Mongolian peoples from West and Central Asia began to cross and settle in north India, beginning a cultural shift that would change the

[38] I am consciously using the passive voice here and in other references to Kathak's oral history to represent the disembodied voice of those who have created and circulated Kathak's mythic history.
[39] These stories derive from the Bhagavata Purana, a Sanskrit text of uncertain date; scholars have suggested a range a wide as 1200 B.C.E. to 1200 C.E. (see Thompson 2007).

face of the region. By the time the Mughal emperor Akbar came to power in the 1550s, a unique Indo-Persian culture had developed in north India, and Islam emerged as the ruling religion. While music and dance were present in the Mughal courts before Akbar, he was responsible for patronizing the arts to an unprecedented degree. North Indian regional dancers found employment in the courts of Akbar and his descendants, and the dance evolved in response to the changing tastes of the elite (Narayan 1998, 19).

It was in this period of Persian influence that Kathak emerged from regional north Indian dance as a distinct genre with formal elements that are still cited and visible today, most notably the upright posture that sets Kathak apart from other Indian classical dances which retained the half-squat *aramandi* as the central posture (Vatsyayan 1992, 78-79). I follow Vatsyayan, Walker, and Chakravorty in affirming that Kathak as it exists today is significantly tied to Persian dance aesthetics that contributed to the development of a new form during the Mughal era. Kathak's existence draws from both Islamic court culture, Sufism, and Hindu Bhakti practice; in other words, it is an essentially syncretic dance. Kathak grew out of flexible responses to changing patronage, music traditions, and performance contexts. For example, Vatsyayan points out how court dancers adapted and responded to musical styles not made for dance, creating the rhythmic compositions of *tora*, *tatkar*, *paran*, and *salaami* that define Kathak nritta repertoire today (Vatsyayan 1992, 81-82).[40] Narayan suggests that the lack of idol-worship among Muslims[41] forced the dance out of its storytelling emphasis and into rhythmic virtuosity (Narayan 1998, 23).

[40] I will offer a fuller analysis of Kathak's rhythmic repertoire in Chapter 1.
[41] In Hindu practice, gods and goddesses are often represented in human forms in paintings, sculptures, dance, and other visual media. Indeed, Hindu worship revolves around *darshan*, or the ritual "looking" in which the devotee connects with divinity through a visual connection with the deity's sculpture, painting, or other visual form. In Islam, the worship of idols and visual representations of God are forbidden. In this new context, visual representations of deities in dance were not allowed, causing dancers to deepen their exploration of rhythmic and abstract elements of Kathak instead.

As the Mughal empire declined due to the effects of British colonialism in the 18th century and broke up into many regional courts led by local Muslim and Hindu rulers, dance continued to be patronized in elite cultural circles. The livelihood of dancers was indeed dependent on appealing to the tastes and aesthetics of their patrons; as a result, Kathak developed distinct styles consolidated into separate *gharanas*, or "houses" of Kathak. These gharanas—chief among them the Lucknow gharana, Jaipur gharana, and Benares gharana[42]—were named originally for the cities where they developed.[43] The Lucknow and Benares gharanas trace both a stylistic and hereditary lineage, whereas the Jaipur gharana consists of many family trees that coalesce around one stylistic thread (Walker 2014, 102-105). At the heart of these gharanas were, and still are, male hereditary practitioners who trace, or at least claim to trace, the transmission of Kathak through generations of their family line. All three of these gharanas developed in royal courts under the patronage of Hindu, Muslim, and in some cases Sikh regimes (Kothari 1989). The tastes of the rulers and the conditions of the court shaped the practice of Kathak differently in each context. We can consider the Lucknow gharana for a moment as a clear example of how Kathak's inherent flexibility facilitates creative adaptations.

The city of Lucknow was the capital of Awadh, a north Indian province that was the last in the area to fall to British rule in 1856. The last *nawab* (regional lord) of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah, has been infamously cast as a debauched leader, concerned only with the aesthetic pleasures of courtly life to the point where he was unable to keep British power at bay. His

[42] The Benares gharana is also referred to as the Janaki Prasad gharana as it represents stylistic influences from many cities, but can be traced back to the dancer Janaki Prasad who originally hailed from Bikaner (Kothari 1989, 59-61).

[43] Some scholars refer to a fourth gharana—the Raigarh gharana of Kathak that grew out of the court of Raja Chakradhar Singh in what is now the state of Madhya Pradesh. The Raja himself was the principal architect of this gharana, and when the court fell apart after being annexed by the British, artists left the capital and the Raigarh-specific practice of Kathak faded (Kothari 1989, 67-74). According to Kothari, efforts are being made by the government of Madhya Pradesh to research and revive the Raigarh style of Kathak (Kothari 1989, 74).

supposed penchant for decadence, however, greatly benefited musicians, dancers, poets, and actors of the time. Kathak[44] flourished under his rule, developing a Lucknowi style that emphasized, grace, subtlety, expressive abhinaya, and the sensual mood of sringar rasa (Narayan 1998, 21; Walker 2014, 103; Massey 1989, 180; Kothari 1989, 24-28; Sampath 2010, 17). As a writer, poet, and student of dance in addition to being a key patron, Wajid Ali Shah can be considered one of the architects of the Lucknow gharana in addition to the hereditary practitioners he patronized. This style of Kathak continued to be known as the Lucknow gharana even after Wajid Ali Shah was exiled to Kolkata—indeed, many Kathak practitioners in Kolkata today identify as Lucknow gharana, demonstrating that the stylistic variations of the gharanas are not limited to the regions they are named for.

It was in the court of Wajid Ali Shah that the *thumri* musical style[45] developed along with its accompanying abhinaya-laden dance, which became a hallmark of the Lucknow Kathak repertoire. The nawab's intense interest in the dance, poetry, and stories surrounding the divine love of Radha and Krishna calls into question the popularly held notion that Hindu aspects of the dance were unilaterally forced into obscurity during Muslim reign. Rather, the Bhakti elements of Kathak dance found new poetic and aesthetic relevance in the syncretic court of Wajid Ali Shah. Kathak's development in Lucknow and then Kolkata demonstrates the dance's natural flexibility in the way it adapted and grew under the conditions of patronage and the tastes of the patron. The development of thumri and other stylistic features of Lucknowi Kathak was led by

[44] Though dance in Wajid Ali Shah's court and other courts of the 18th and 19th centuries was not called "Kathak" by name, the techniques and repertoire items of that time directly feed into what is recognizable as Kathak today (Walker 2014, 66-73).

[45] *Thumri* is a light classical musical style that is rendered in so-called "light" (in other words, less complex) melodic patterns. Thumri lyrics straddle the romantic and the devotional, often recalling stories of Krishna's romantic exploits. According to Vikram Sampath, "the word thumri is said to be derived from the Hindustani word '*Thumakna'* meaning an attractive gait. So literally it means a song that has an attractive, rather sensuous, gait in both melody and rhythm" (Sampath 2010, 102).

male hereditary practitioners in creative response to the tastes of the nawab. These practitioners include Thakur Prasad, his brother Durga Prasad, and his nephew Bindadin Maharaj, as well as their female courtesan[46] disciples like Malka Jaan and Gauhar Jaan.[47] The lineage of the male dancers continues today in the form of Lucknow gharana doyen Birju Maharaj, an internationally acclaimed Kathak artist whose name has become synonymous with Kathak dance itself because of his traceable family tree that includes generations of male court artists.

Dance in the royal courts was tied to patronage in an essential and productive way. The repertoire and technical emphases of the dance changed in different regions in line with the development of unique styles based in hereditary or guru-disciple lineages. While the development of these unique styles points towards Kathak's ability to adapt to variant tastes and cultural conditions, the gharanas have also served to fix Kathak into particular artistic and regional identities. Walker points out that the gharanas consciously formed as a way to "give performing artists not only a distinctive and marketable socio-musical identity but also an authoritative musical pedigree," (Walker 2014, 20). Gharanas exemplify the diversity and flexibility of Kathak dance practice and history even as they solidify distinct, fixed modes of Kathak. Lucknow gharana Kathak fixes the dance to a graceful and subtle style that focuses on the finesse of *ang* or bodily comportment, the nuance of abhinaya, and the repertoire items that came out of the Lucknowi courts. These include the delicate *thumri* that explores the romantic mood, the *salaami* or the choreographed greeting of the patrons and musicians, and the use of Urdu poetry and related *ghazal* genre of music that come from Persian musical traditions.[48]

[46] Other notable courtesans of the Awadh province include Zohrabai, Mushtaribai, Sukhbandan, Gulbandan, Janbaksha Bandawali, Adhvan Unnaonivasi, Bi Lutfan, Chandrabai Akbarabadwali, and Jaddanbai (Narayan 1998, 20).
[47] Sampath, Vikram. *'My Name is Gauhar Jaan!' The Life and Times of a Musician.* Rupa Publications India: 2010.
[48] Ali, Agha Shahid. *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English.* Wesleyan University Press: 2000.

Jaipur gharana Kathak fixed the dance to vigorous footwork that used a wider variety of foot positions and was most concerned with rhythmic mastery and innovative rhythmic combinations. The Benares gharana featured a more acrobatic style that included jumps, sudden drops into sitting positions,[49] and powerful chakkars executed both to the left and the right with equal skill (in all other practices of Kathak, chakkars are executed almost exclusively to the left). Unlike the Lucknow gharana, both the Jaipur and Benares gharanas favor a greater amount of energetic movement over precise lines and controlled gestures. The Benares gharana eventually diminished in popularity in comparison to the Jaipur gharana which featured many of the same elements developed by dancers who moved between the two cities. The ubiquity of the Lucknow and Jaipur gharanas[50] in particular have narrowed the field of Kathak in the modern day, limiting the recognition of Kathak practice that doesn't fall neatly into either of these styles.

What I wish to underline here is the reality that the gharanas of Kathak dance do not point to any essential qualities of the dance that differ region to region. Rather, the formation of gharanas of Kathak mark a moment in history when the dance was recast by certain interested parties who ultimately fixed Kathak to certain purposefully established categories and male hereditary lineages. As Walker describes,

> "the division of repertoire and style into the *gharanas* seems as much political as artistic […] competition for patronage and need for stability in the new marketplace convinced the dancers to make their identities official and then to project their histories back through time. The identities are real, and so too, in a way, are the histories, but […] there is an ongoing process of identity construction" (Walker 2014, 108).

[49] One of the few remaining high-profile Kathak dancers who identify as Benares gharana, Vishal Krishna, has even incorporated side splits into his repertoire of finishing postures. In most practices of Kathak this would be highly unconventional, but in the Benares tradition it is considered par for the course. See: "Sri Vishal Krishna- Kathak- Tabla -Pt. Pooran Maharaj." *YouTube*, uploaded by Badal Mondal, February 17, 2016.

[50] Walker points to the hegemony of the Maharaj lineage in the Lucknow gharana, further sanctified by an Indian government wanting to invest in traceable lines of hereditary practice, and the conscious efforts of Jaipur gharana dancers to distinguish themselves against court dancers from Lucknow, as reasons why these two gharanas grew into the largest and most influential gharanas of Kathak (Walker 2015, 99-108).

The division of repertoire and style into gharanas, therefore, is an act of fixity that capitalizes on Kathak's vastness and flexibility to meet conditions of patronage. New identities for the dance developed along the way.

Nautch and Anti-Nautch

As the patronage of Muslim courts shifted and declined, a class of female hereditary professional dancers carried on Kathak dance and its associated north Indian classical music in private salons. These courtesans or *tawaifs* were the primary culture bearers of north Indian music and dance when the British Raj took control of India in 1858 (Walker 2010, 281; Sampath 2010; Oldenburg 1990). Their dance tradition became known as nautch, an anglicized version of the Hindi word *naach*, referring to dance. The tawaifs and nautch dancers were patronized by local elites as well as by British officers and diplomats. Literature in Hindi, Urdu, and English all point toward strong connections between the performance practice of tawaifs and present-day Kathak repertoire and technique (Walker 2010). I'll add here that while the tawaifs of north India are sometimes conflated with the devadasis of south India, whose dance practice is noted as the precursor of the modern iteration of Bharatanatyam, no real connection exists between the two. Nautch dancers and tawaifs came from the tradition of private court dancers, and are unrelated to the devadasi dancers who were dedicated to particular temples or religious communities. The similarity exists in the fact that both devadasis in the south and courtesans in the north were forced out of their dance practice and in some cases entered prostitution to maintain a livelihood.

According to Sunil Kothari and many others, "the institution of the courtesans sustained the art of Kathak though it assumed a different character […] dance had already degenerated into a vulgar art and was in danger of extinction" in the 19th century (Kothari 1989, 15). By the

1830s the British upper class no longer patronized nautch dancers, instead "proposing that these art forms exhibited unrestrained sexuality and aroused anti-Christian feelings" (Chakravorty 2008, 42). Victorian morality around obscenity and women's sexuality, coupled with the fact that one in four British soldiers were infected with venereal disease often allegedly transmitted by dancer-prostitutes, motivated the India-wide Anti-Nautch Movement of the 1890s, sweeping up the Indian intellectual and elite classes into the social reform of what was seen as the debased practice of dance.[51] However, as Veena Oldenburg has shown, the daily life of courtesans in cities like Lucknow enacted a kind of resistance against patriarchal systems that limited women's ability to exercise power and accumulate wealth. The movements against these women sought to regulate their practices and minimize their contributions to elite culture. For example,

> "the imposition of the contagious diseases regulations and heavy fines and penalties on the courtesans for their role in the [1857] rebellion signaled the gradual debasement of an esteemed cultural institution into common prostitution. Women who had […] been the custodians of culture and the setters of fashion trends were left in an extremely dubious and vulnerable position under the British. 'Singing and dancing girls' was the classification invented to describe them in the civic tax ledgers and encapsulates one of the many profound cultural misunderstandings of 'exotic' Indian women by colonial authorities" (Oldenburg 1990, 260).

Clearly what was at stake for both British and Indian moral authorities was more than women's sexual expression and the morality of dance—it was the reservoirs of power these dancing women had created for themselves. Scholars like Kothari, Mohan Khokar, and many others have derided the immoral practice of nautch dancers even as they begrudgingly concede that many of these dancers excelled in their arts and contributed to the preservation of the Kathak form (Khokar 1984, Kothari 1989). According to Walker,

> these statements, although presented in a framework designed to reinforce hereditary male authority and ownership of the dance, nonetheless recognize a strong hereditary female presence in the dance's past. Critically unpacking this part of the dance's history,

[51] Oldenburg, Veena Talwar. "Lifestyle as resistance: The case of the courtesans of Lucknow, India." *Feminist Studies* 16.2 (1990): 259-287.

> however, threatens the hegemony of the [male hereditary] Kathaks and, with the exception of Chakravorty, scholars have only rarely attempted it (Walker 2014, 90).

The desire to control these women culminated in the outright banning of nautch in 1905—which included local practices of the courtesan dances related to Kathak as well as many other regional forms (Chakravorty 2008, 45). The legal disenfranchisement of the nautch dancers forced many of them to reinvent themselves as musicians only, or to enter prostitution and lose their elite social status. Cleansing this link between dance and "public women" became one of the primary goals of the classicization process of the Independence era, because "all traditional cultural practices […] needed to be revamped for purification and national regeneration" (Chakravorty 2008, 45).

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The tumult of the Anti-Nautch period left Kathak dance in a vulnerable position. A huge number of the chief practitioners of the form were forced underground. Many left the field of performance altogether, and many more faded into anonymity. The formal and informal process of "rescuing" Kathak through classicization begins here. In Chapter 1, I will take a closer look how Kathak was transformed through classicization in a process that cleansed the dance of its courtesan history by lifting up the practice of male hereditary practitioners and creating controlled pathways for largely "respectable," high-caste, and class-privileged women to carry on the form.

SECTION II: Kathak in the Diaspora

Before exploring how Kathak arrived in the U.K. and US, it would be helpful to lay out a brief description of the Indian diaspora. In this study I use "members of the Indian diaspora," "Indian diasporic subjects," and simply "diaspora," to refer to three specific populations who are engaged with Kathak dance: 1) individuals born in the U.S. or the U.K. who trace their parentage, ancestry, or heritage to India on a genealogical or adoptive basis (the individuals in my study mostly had parents or grandparents who were born in India and immigrated to the U.S. or the U.K., sometimes via Africa or the Caribbean), 2) immigrants from India who live in the U.S. or U.K. as permanent residents and/or naturalized citizens; and, to a lesser extent, 3) individuals who live primarily in India but who travel to the U.S. or the U.K. regularly, largely for artistic engagement. These three populations interact with Kathak dance as a network of students, teachers, presenters, performers, choreographers, spectators, and supporters of the art. Because this is a project concerned with national labels, I choose to use "Indian" as opposed to "South Asian" to focus this project on the diaspora of people and practices from the modern-day Indian nation- state.[52]

I frame the establishment of a diaspora of Indians in the U.K. and the U.S., and the related developments in the practice and purpose of Kathak dance, in terms of the heightened transnational and multidirectional flows of people, culture, and capital that have defined the last century (Appadurai 1996, Schiller et al 1995, Portes et al 1999, Waldinger 2015). Globalized economics and mass migration have changed the nature of the nation-state, creating porous borders and mixed populations (Ong 1999, Lionnet and Shih, 2005, Shah 2013). In turn, notions

[52] "South Asia" includes the countries of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, and sometimes Bhutan.

of national identity have become subject to an increased tension between flexibility and fixity. The flexibility of capital and mobility that transnationalism entails can enable a similarly flexible mode of being in which individuals move between discourses of national identification as they navigate globalized systems of labor and belonging (Ong 1999; Srinivasan 2011; Kedhar 2014; Rosa 2015). However, the precarious position of the nation-state in a transnational world can also spur increased investment in fixed notions of collective national identity (Appadurai 1996; Anderson 2006; Mankekar 2015). It is this tension between the flexible "I" and the fixed "we" that cultural productions like the practice of Kathak dance can illuminate, as it interrogates or reaffirms the "myth of national identity" (Brah 1996, 149; Lowe 1996, 9).

I begin to situate my study of Kathak in this transnational landscape by looking at the histories of Indian migration in my two field sites of London and Los Angeles. I cast these sites as "diaspora spaces" where multiple cultural, political, and social influences interact to create a new and fertile context for Kathak's engagement with flexibility and fixity. I'll then offer a brief look at how Kathak arrived in these spaces, culminating in a description of the two key models of diasporic Kathak dance I theorize in this dissertation.

Indians in Diaspora Spaces

Indians make up the largest ethno-racial minority group in London, and indeed in all of the U.K., followed closely by Pakistanis. Indian immigration to the U.K. dates back to before the official start of British colonialism, when the East India Company began to recruit South Asian seamen during the 18th century. Migration continued steadily through the British seizure of India, throughout the colonial period, and following Indian independence in 1947. Many Indians arrived in the U.K. and London via east African states such as Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania,

and also parts of the Caribbean; many of these countries were former British colonies. As a result, the Indian population in Britain is diverse in terms of origin stories, class backgrounds, and occupations.

Los Angeles, on the other hand, has a comparatively small population of Indians than London, though the size of the Indian diaspora in the U.S. is significantly larger than that in the U.K. (nearly 4.5 million Indians reside in the U.S., compared to the 1.8 million living in the U.K.). Non-European immigration to the U.S. was tightly controlled from the inception of the United States as settler colonial state in 1776 until the passage of the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, which maintained a per-country quota system but created a path for educated Indians with specialized skills to move to the U.S. with their families. This was different from the U.K. context, where migrants from a wide range of occupational and class backgrounds in former colonies were able to enter the country. The skill-based nature of U.S. immigration during this time resulted in a population of diasporic Indian Americans who are comparatively more affluent and white-collar than the population in the U.K., evidence of "one of the most selective emigrant flows out of a sending country (India) into a destination country (United States)" (Chakravorty et al 2017, 25). Indeed, the Indian American population is a population of outliers in many ways: "it is the most educated of all subgroups (in the U.S.), exceptionally so in the fields of science and technology, and therefore is extraordinarily concentrated in a handful of high-skill, high-wage professions. Indian Americans constitute the highest income group in the country."[53] Since 1965, Los Angeles has become home to the fourth largest population of Indians in the U.S.

[53] Chakravorty, Sanjoy, Devesh Kapur, and Nirvikar Singh. *The other one percent: Indians in America*. Oxford University Press, 2016. Pg 27.

The selective nature of Indian immigration to the U.S. can be seen as the last side effect of centuries of governmental discrimination against Asian migrants, who were welcomed to the U.S. as farmers and laborers in the early 1900s but denied the rights of citizenship and property ownership.[54] Even with the passage of the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952, which abolished racial restrictions on citizenship eligibility and allowed all immigrants access to American citizenship, Asians were marginalized in the national image of "American." As Anurima Banerji has argued, the McCarran-Walter Act was a "performance of official identity, a killing of history" that terminated the history of Asian exploitation and alienation through the technology of the law (Banerji 2002, 4158-4159, 4161). In doing so, the Act created a semblance of racial equity while centering whiteness through the creation of categories like "Asian American" in opposition to "American" (Banerji 2002, 4160). Asian American, in other words, is not the same as American; marking these kinds of distinctions is part of how the U.S. manages global flows while protecting an American identity that is centered around whiteness.

However, historian Vinay Lal shows that in 1950, a U.S. census category of "Asian Indian" emerged with support from the Indian American population (Lal 2008, 55). He suggests that Indian Americans of this era wanted to maintain a racial and cultural identity distinct from the general "Asian" or even "American" label. This marks a key discursive flip; in the early part of the century, it was in the interest of Indians in America to identify as "Caucasian" in an attempt to gain citizenship rights, as exemplified by the 1923 Supreme Court case *United States*

[54] Following mounting racism against Indians and other Asian laborers in the U.S., the Barred Zone Act of 1917 barred all entry of Asians to the U.S. However, during this period, some Indians were able to gain American citizenship due to confusion over their claimed status as "Caucasian," deriving from Aryan ancestry. However, the Supreme Court decision in *United States vs. Bhagat Singh Thind* in 1923 ended the ambiguity by deciding that all Indians were ineligible for citizenship, and those who had gained citizenship lost their naturalized status. Indians could also no longer own land. These conditions resulted in a dramatic drop in the Indian population in America from the 1920s to the 1940s— the number of Indians in America dwindled from 8,000 to 2,045 by 1940 (Lal 2008, 34-42). In 1946, the Luce-Celler Act once again allowed Indians to be naturalized and opened immigration to 100 Indians per year.

vs. Bhagat Singh Thind (see footnote 54). But India's rise on the global stage, the American recognition of iconic figures like Mahatma Gandhi,[55] and changing immigration policies in the U.S. led to a reinvestment in a distinct Indian American identity. Lal suggests that much of this discursive shift in racial allegiance—from Caucasian to Indian—can be attributed to the rise of "long-distance nationalism" among Indian Americans beginning with the freedom fighters of the Ghadr movement, who organized from northern California in the 1920s and lobbied for Indian independence from overseas. They propelled the idea that "Indianness," as configured in India, was still important to shaping the lives of diasporic Indians, and reasoned that if India achieved political independence, it would shift the perceptions of Indians abroad, changing their image as objects of colonial rule to sovereign citizens and subjects. These connections continued in a material sense with contemporary immigrants who maintain strong economic and familial ties to India (Lal 2008). I recast this idea of "long-distance Indianness" as part of a heritage model of Kathak practice, as I will describe in detail in Chapter 2.

Indians and other postcolonial subjects in the U.K. have a similarly shifting history of marginal positionality in the national image of "British" subjects. For many decades, Indians aligned with other minority groups under the label "black" as a form of collective acknowledgement of (and activism against) their non-white and therefore second-class status in the U.K. (Brah 1996). Avtar Brah points out that "although 'black' crystallized around 'white/non-white,' it subverted the logic of this binary. Moreover, by addressing a wide range of diasporic experiences in their local and global specificity, the project foregrounded the politics of transnationality" (1996, 13). Leading up to the consolidation of many nationalities under the

[55] Gandhi spearheaded a campaign of nonviolent resistance to British occupation that eventually led to India achieving political independence in 1947; his philosophy of nonviolence also influenced subsequent American civil rights movements.

politically-driven designation "black" were centuries of British colonialism built on a narrative of socially and culturally inferior 'natives' in need of British guidance and enlightenment. Britain's imperial authority in South Asia allowed it to develop into a "dominant culture (that) represents itself as *the* culture […] [and] tries to define and contain all other cultures within its inclusive range" (Brah 1996, 19). This sense of the U.K.'s civilizational and moral supremacy endured even in the aftermath of the dissolution of the British colonial project as a political venture. This is the context in which post-partition, post-WWII Indian migration took place.

The 1950s and 1960s saw a flood of migration as postcolonial subjects traveled to the U.K. to fill the labor shortage caused by World War II. Indians and other migrants from Asia and Africa took on unskilled and low-wage work in what Sami Zubaida considers the next phase of British colonial subjugation—despite the fact that the former colonies had obtained formal political independence.[56] Similar to the situation in the U.S., Asian migrants in the U.K. were under regular attack by the larger white population for their perceived unsavory living conditions and cultural practices, even as their labor lifted up the British economy in a time of need (Brah 1979). Mounting racism against the perceived influx of "colored" people to the U.K. led to a variety of immigration acts that curtailed the immigration of people from the Commonwealth and former British colonies. While conservative political groups in the U.K. sought to restrict Asian and African immigration, liberal groups were concerned with the assimilation of non-white immigrants into a "Western" lifestyle (Brah 1996, 22). In both movements, immigrant cultures were rendered unwelcome, undesirable, or unsustainable.

The 1970s and 1980s saw an increased and organized response of Indian immigrants to the question of protecting and uplifting their own cultural identity and place in British society.

[56] Zubaida, Sami. *Race and Racialism*, Tavistock Publications: 1970.

Continuing systemic racism in the form of restrictive and targeted immigration laws, workplace discrimination, and day-to-day harassment spurred Indians and other immigrants to facilitate their own community development, cultural education, and social affirmation. In her seminal 1976 report for the British Commission for Racial Equality, *The Arts Britain Ignores*, Naseem Khan called out the British government's lack of support for or even knowledge about the art and culture of its many minority communities, resulting in major policy changes in the years that followed.[57] The emergence of a "second-generation" of British Asians born in the U.K. also ushered in a new era of cultural transformation, public protest, and personal investment in a new "British Asian" identity "mediated via cultural, political, and economic dimensions as these are forged in Britain" (Brah 1996, 47). Similar to their parents, this generation of British Asians are largely working class. Unlike their American counterparts, whose migration history is marked by "selection for success,"[58] the lives of many British Indians today represent an unfulfilled promise of equal opportunity (Brah 1996, 65). Also unlike their Asian American counterparts, who are constructed as "politically passive cultural outsider[s]" and model minorities,[59] British Asians in the U.K. continue a history of political engagement; they "question, resist, challenge and repudiate the social and cultural mechanisms which underpin their subordination" (Brah 1996, 65).

According to Lal, political positions among Indian Americans are "fundamentally informed by identity politics multiculturalism, the pressing question of lifestyle choices, and a

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[57] Khan, Naseem. *The Arts Britain Ignores: The Arts of Ethnic Minorities in Britain*. Commission for Racial Equality, London, 1978.

[58] Chakravorty et al show how Indians arrived in the U.S. after 1965 through a "triple selection" process: "the first two selections took place in India, where the social system created a small pool of persons to receive higher education, who were urban, educated, and from high/dominant castes; and also where there was an examination system that selected individuals from this socially selected pool to receive higher education in technical fields. This doubly-selected pool of individuals then became eligible for selection by an U.S. immigration system that favored individuals with specific skills, especially, in recent years, information technology" (Chakravorty et al 2016, 27).

[59] Wong, Yutian. *Choreographing Asian America*. Wesleyan University Press, 2010. Pg. 34.

concern about the geopolitics of culture" (Lal 2008, 78). Reifying Indian national identity became its own political platform, one that positions Indian culture homogeneously as "something that is almost eternal, rooted to timeless traditions, imbibed with mother's breast milk, a comfort zone of certainties, a repository of known moral values" (Lal 2008, 78). Lal suggests that the notion of "Indian culture" is far more stable and static in the U.S. than in India itself, where the specificities and realities of everyday life underscore constant cultural change. Purnima Mankekar critically explores this notion of a "fixed" Indian identity in her project of "unsettling" India by revealing the "creation of India as an archive of affect and temporality" through the circulation of media and goods from India to the U.S. (Mankekar 2015, 5). She shows how a notion of "India" as a place and an identity is constructed and refracted through movies, TV shows, and consumer goods, suggesting that the idea of India is continually emergent and mediated, rather than stable or original. In their studies of the South Asian youth music scenes in the U.S. and U.K., respectively, Sunaina Maira (2012) and Falu Bakrania (2013) both articulate a similar theory of Indian identity that is popularly formed, contextually interpreted, collectively regulated, and continually contested in the hybridized spaces of the diaspora.[60] Both authors show how essentializing norms of cultural authenticity are often created by diasporic communities as part of a political project that involves not only "saving a culture that its members fear is in danger of dying, but also resisting oppressors" (Bakrania 2013, 16).

In this study of Kathak dance in Los Angeles and London, I build upon the argument that Indian culture is not necessarily affixed to India as a territory, but is rather "constantly re-produced, reinvented, and unsettled within India and in diasporic communities with varying

[60] Maira, Sunaina. *Desis in the house: Indian American youth culture in NYC*. Temple University Press, 2012. Bakrania, Falu. *Bhangra and Asian underground: South Asian music and the politics of belonging in Britain*. Duke University Press, 2013.

relationships to India" (Mankekar 2015, 8). I similarly de-center India as "homeland," as a privileged locus or source of Indian culture or tradition, to focus instead on how individuals and institutions create their own fixed ideas of India as part of their strategic navigation of diasporic life in the specific localities of Los Angeles and London.

I do this by framing these two cities as flexible "diaspora spaces" (Brah 1996, 209-210), each with particular conditions of fixity that shape national identity. Brah describes how studying diaspora makes evident the "confluence of narratives" that shape identity in any given moment, stating that "the identity of the diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre-given. It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively" (Brah 1996, 183). These narratives can converge in different combinations towards different political and psychological ends; revealing the work of these narratives through a study of diaspora lays bare contextual discourses of fixity. Thus,

> a concept of diaspora emerges as an ensemble of investigative technologies that historicize trajectories of different diasporas, map their relationality, and interrogate, for example, what the search for origins signifies in the history of a particular diaspora […] how particular fields of power articulate in the construction of hierarchies of domination and subordination in a given context […] and whether or not these conceptions are reinforced or challenged and contested by the play of identities (Brah 1996, 198).

Brah's theory of the "diaspora space" offers a useful summary of how this approach to understanding culture and migration through the investigative tool of the diaspora can question hegemonies of nation, state, and race. The diaspora space implicates immigrants and their descendants as well as those people constructed as indigenous in an "intertwining of genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'" which serves to decenter the "native" and show how notions of the "periphery" or the "margin" are constructed (Brah 1996, 209-210). The United Kingdom is a diaspora space, as is the United States, as is any place touched by migration and

global flows (Appadurai 1996).[61] Identity is established and maintained within these specific geographies of relations.[62]

Sitara Thobani applies a similar theory of relationality in her study of Indian classical dance and postcoloniality in the U.K.[63] She shows how "Indian dance has become a key aspect of the mutual constitution of not only postcolonial Indian and South Asian diasporic identities, but also British national identity as multicultural and transnational" (Thobani 2017, 6). Like Brah, Thobani underscores the relational production of identity between minoritarian and majoritarian groups, exploring how the reputed cultural authenticity of Indian classical dance can in fact construct *British* national identity in relation to Indian diasporic identity. She studies these relations in the context of the "perennial production of coloniality through cultural and artistic performance" that reveal the "staying power of colonial discourses in reconfigured iterations of subjectivity and national identity in the present" (Thobani 2017, 8, 7).

While Thobani focuses on specific questions of postcoloniality and imperial legacy in the U.K., I follow a similar thread of relationality to explore the broader question of fixity and flexibility in a diaspora space that includes both the U.S. and the U.K. I unfold my arguments in the context of this space of both high-stakes, highly regulated cultural expression, as well as creative, productive identity negotiation that is interpellated by the specific social, political, and material conditions of each locale. In doing so I hope to honor the "multiplicity riven with tensions" that more accurately describes the reality of diasporic life in transnational cities like London and Los Angeles than flattening terms like "diverse" or "multicultural," which might

[61] Brah's framework of the diaspora space is compatible with Appadurai's notion of "ethnoscapes," which refers to "the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals" (Appadurai 1996, 33). In this project I apply Brah's framework to better center the diasporic populations of my study.
[62] Massey, Doreen. *World City*. Polity, 2007.
[63] Thobani, Sitara. *Indian Classical Dance and the Making of Postcolonial National Identities: Dancing on Empire's Stage*. Routledge, 2017.

conceal asymmetric relations of power between various groups (Massey 2007, 89). This position requires that conflicts are recognized and implicit political positions and consequences made explicit, acknowledging that "urban space is relational, not a mosaic of simply juxtaposed differences" (Massey 2007, 89).

London and Los Angeles

This brings me to London and Los Angeles, my specific field sites for this project. In my study, these cities are "specific nodes, articulations within (a) wider power-geometry" that is comprised of continually shifting and interconnected social relations (Massey 2007, 167). These relations interact distinctly in each city, because each place is a different articulation of histories, peoples, politics, and social flows (Massey 2007, 168). My comparative analysis seeks to highlight these distinctions and specificities, if not bring them into direct conversation with one another. By laying out an argument around diasporic identity in reference to two different places, I methodologically underscore the importance of specificity in any study of place, identity, and diaspora.

The cities of London and Los Angeles offer a useful comparison for my study as centers of diverse cultural production and Kathak practice. Both industrial, globalized city-regions[64] with significant immigrant populations, these two cities exemplify the politics of local, national, and international scale[65] that define diasporic life (Scott 2001; Smith 1992). Both London and Los Angeles act as "global cultural supermarkets" that disseminate cultural goods, services, and

[64] I use the definition of "city-region" set forth by Allen J. Scott et al, which describes urban areas of large, heterogeneous populations, significant international economic activity, and polycentric geographic spatiality (Scott 2001).

[65] I draw from Neil Smith's description of geographic scale in my thinking around how the global cities of London and Los Angeles offer diasporic populations access to multiple levels of identity affiliation, ranging from the local community or ethnic enclave to the national level, and to the international sphere (Smith 1992).

media across the world, participating in a global cultural hegemony[66] based in the West (Mathews 2000; Abrahamson 2004). I plan to explore how access to or exclusion from that hegemonic circulation of culture interacts with questions of national recognition and belonging for diasporic Indian Kathak dancers. Though both cities are home to considerable Indian populations, London and Los Angeles differ in their relationship with India in terms of colonial history, migration history, and approaches to art patronage.

As the symbolic seat of a legacy of British imperialism, London has a complex relationship with the histories of colonized Indian people and the futures of Indian immigrants who have been relocating to the U.K. for centuries, as described earlier. Today, an official government policy to support multicultural life and expression within the U.K. pushes against the anti-immigrant discourse surrounding the recent Brexit decision[67]—caught in the middle are 1.8 million Indians living in the U.K., half a million of whom live in London. Meanwhile, the U.S. only saw significant numbers of Indian settlement after 1965 during an immigration boom unfettered by a direct imperialist history of the U.S. in relation to India. The Indian population of Los Angeles reflects the generally affluent, educated status of these post-1965 immigrants, whereas Indians in London constitute a much more socio-economically diverse population.[68] These differences of class can be seen in the background of Kathak dancers in both cities. The

[66] Massey also points out how "global cities" like London and Los Angeles are discursively dominant in the production of national culture in the U.K. and the U.S., respectively (Massey 2007, 116). By theorizing national identity formation based on fieldwork from these two cities, this project contributes to the discursive dominance of London and Los Angeles. By marking these cities as key sites for the production of nationality, I admit I perpetuate their hegemonic position in national and international imaginings of identity even as I attempt to deconstruct their workings.

[67] Brexit was the 2016 referendum to withdraw the U.K. from the European Union. The referendum passed by popular vote, but after many delays has still yet to be executed as of spring 2019. The campaign for Brexit became loaded with anti-immigrant rhetoric as the withdrawal of the U.K. from E.U. was seen as an effort to limit immigration to the U.K.

[68] Los Angeles consists of comparatively fewer Indians than London, though the size of the Indian diaspora in the U.S. is significantly larger than that in the U.K. (nearly 4.5 million Indians reside in the U.S., compared to the 1.8 million living in the U.K.). Since 1965, Los Angeles has become home to the fourth largest population of Indians in the U.S.

city of Los Angeles also supports a theoretically multiculturalist agenda of inclusion, operating within, and often against, the anti-immigrant national-level discourse of the Trump administration[69] that echoes some of the nationalist political rhetoric coming out of the U.K.

Both cities are markedly different in the level of organization and consolidation within the Kathak community, as will become clear in the coming chapters. London is the hub of several large-scale training institutions and professional development organizations that link Kathak dancers to each other as well as to musicians, other dancers, event producers, and funders. Perhaps because of the geographical breadth and distances marking Los Angeles and surrounding areas, and the scant system of public transportation linking different communities (compared to London), dancers in Los Angeles appear relatively isolated from one another. There is a marked lack of collaboration and organization between dancers from different schools and neighborhoods, making it difficult to mobilize towards the large-scale recognition of the form on the city or national level. While there are distinct concentrations of Indian residents in the boroughs of Hounslow and Ealing Southall in London, there aren't any notable Indian neighborhoods in Los Angeles. The commercial hub of Artesia has many Indian shops and restaurants, but few actual Indian residents.

Kathak practitioners in Los Angeles also lack the presence of an internationally-recognized iconic figure like dancer Akram Khan, who has brought Kathak into the U.K.'s national imaginary. Khan's choreography for the Opening Ceremony of the 2012 Olympics in London was a seminal moment in Kathak's diasporic history, when the Bangladeshi-British artist

[69] After campaigning on an anti-immigration platform that was replete with racist and incendiary comments about immigrants and non-white Americans, Donald Trump won the American presidential elections in 2016.

created a large-scale work for a nationally and globally significant platform.[70] Though Khan's Olympic Ceremony choreography *Abide with Me* represented his unique dancemaking approach that merges his Kathak training with Western contemporary techniques and other influences that form Khan's practice of "new interculturalism," it still spoke to the relevance of Kathak and Indian dance practice in contemporary British life (Mitra 2015). In the U.S., on the other hand, there is no comparable public figure who straddles both the Kathak world and the broader dance field at the national level. Two Kathak artists have been awarded the National Heritage Fellowship, the highest national honor awarded by the National Endowment for the Arts—Anjani Ambegaokar (from Los Angeles) in 2004 and the late Chitresh Das (from San Francisco) in 2009. However, the National Heritage Fellowship is restricted to the marginalized "folk and traditional arts" field, and the fact of its award does not capture the popular imagination the way Khan's work for major national and worldwide platforms does.

However, in contrast to its place in U.S. and U.K. national cultures at large, Kathak has featured in both British and American television in similar ways. The position of Los Angeles as the arts capital of the U.S.[71] and its proximity to the media industry based in Hollywood offers dancers some avenues for mainstream recognition, mirroring the presence of Kathak on network television in London. The proximity to mainstream media affects the practice, marketing, and presentation of Kathak in both cities. In 2009, Orange County-based Kathak dancer Amrapali Ambegaokar (the daughter of above-mentioned NEA Fellow Anjani Ambegaokar) appeared on the short-lived 2009 dance competition show *Superstars of Dance*, which featured dancers from around the world, specializing in different styles. She also appeared on one episode of *So You*

[70] Whitworth, Damian. "Akram Khan, the surprise dance star of the Olympics opening ceremony." *The Times*, August 28, 2013, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/akram-khan-the-surprise-dance-star-of-the-olympics-opening-ceremony-xvs3pvspc02. Accessed May 2, 2019.
[71] Los Angeles is home to the largest population of creative professionals per capita in the U.S (S. Mitra, 2017).

Think You Can Dance? as a special exhibition performer, although not as a competitor. In both these instances, American-born Ambegaokar's Indianness and the seemingly foreign nature of her dance were exoticized for mass consumption. The otherness of her extravagant costumes, the looming shadows of the Taj Mahal projected behind her, and her decontextualized recitation of Kathak *bols* or syllables were highlighted appealingly novel. In the *BBC Young Dancer* competition series that has been airing in the U.K. since 2015, Kathak dancers regularly compete both within the "South Asian" dance category and then against ballet, hip-hop, and contemporary dance genres. All three of these shows reify Kathak for its difference and its marketability as an exciting foreign product, though *BBC Young Dancer* does attempt to recognize the South Asian dancers as British national subjects.[72] These representations of Kathak that emanate from the media capitals of London and LA are an important part of a dance landscape that Kathak dancers navigate in the diasporic context.

A Diversion in the Social Life of Kathak Dance

Here I will back up a moment to discuss the arrival of Kathak in the U.K. and the U.S. and how its exponents established its presence in these two national contexts. Avanthi Meduri notes that "devadasi courtesans" appeared on the London stage early in the 19th century—their 1838 tour of Europe was considered a success that rode the waves of the Oriental Renaissance in European fine arts and eventually inspired Marius Petipa's version of *La Bayadére* in 1877.[73] Priya Srinivasan has shown how nautch dancers from India performed in New York as early as 1881, imported for their exotic allure but almost immediately marginalized in another example of

[72] For an analysis of the South Asian dance category in the *BBC Young Dancer* series, see Gorringe 2019.
[73] Meduri, Avanthi. "Interweaving Dance Archives: Devadasis, Bayaderes, and Nautch girls of 1838." In *Movements of Interweaving: Dance and Corporeality in Times of Travel and Migration*, edited by Gabriele Brandstetter, Gerko Egert, and Holger Hartung. Routledge: 2018.

the exclusionary legal policies and anti-Asian racism of that era.[74] In both instances, the dancers were embedded within social, cultural, and political discourses that framed the dance and the dancers in terms of their racialized and gendered difference as well as their exotic value as foreigners. In the early 20th century, several non-Indian "Oriental(ist)" dancers with exposure to Kathak, or styles of nautch dance that preceded modern Kathak, toured the U.S.—among these were Ruth St. Denis, Beatrice Prentice, and Maud Allen, who was performing "Indian" dance in the U.S. as early as 1906.[75]

The Indian-born dancer Madame Menaka, whose legacy will be discussed more in Chapter 1, performed Kathak in Paris in 1930, where she was described as pushing out another half-Indian dancer, Nyota Inyoka.[76] Inyoka had been performing something described as Indian dance in Paris as early as 1924, though it is unclear whether Inyoka had any classical Indian dance training.[77] Madame Menaka launched the Sanskritized, codified iteration of Kathak we know today to the international stage at the 1936 Olympiad in Berlin, where she took home top prizes in performance (a strange occurrence, given that the Nazi government led by Hitler and steeped in the ideology of white supremacy had supervised the Games where the Indian dancer

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[74] Srinivasan, Priya. *Sweating saris: Indian dance as transnational labor*. Temple University Press, 2011. Srinivasan's work shows how Indian dances, including nautch forms that preceded modern Kathak, contributed to shaping American identity at the turn of the century: "Asian practices were ultimately needed to help define and constitute the boundaries of whiteness and Americanness […] As white bourgeois women absorbed and restaged dance practices from India, Indian performing bodies and their labor were no longer needed. The state cemented this exclusion with anti-Asian immigration laws. Thus, the kinesthetic legacy of nautch dancing women was absorbed by white artists such as St. Denis and rendered invisible within the North American modern dance project. Indian dancers were denied assimilation within U.S. citizenship discourses, even though their bodily labor was necessary and inherent in the evolution of U.S. modern dance" (Srinivasan 2011, 61).

[75] "Bringing Temple Dances from the Orient to Broadway: Hindu Types and Ceremonies in a New Jersey Girl's Novel Exhibition." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Mar 25, 1906, pp. 1. *ProQuest*, https://search.proquest.com/docview/96670026?accountid=14512

"Maud Allen for America: Dancer will appear in New York in November." *New York Times (1857-1922),* Jun 20, 1909, pp. 9. ProQuest, https://search.proquest.com/docview/96940538?accountid=14512.

[76] "Foreign show News: Indian Dancers are 1 Too Many in Paris." *Variety (Archive: 1905-2000)*, vol. 100, no. 20, Nov 26, 1930, pp. 55. *ProQuest*, https://search.proquest.com/docview/1475913999?accountid=14512.

[77] "Gives Eastern Dances: Princess Nyota Inyoka Greeted by Brilliant Audience." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Feb 25, 1924, pp. 13. *ProQuest*, https://search.proquest.com/docview/103374119?accountid=14512.

won top honors).[78] Just three years later, Indian modern dancer Ram Gopal brought Kathak dancer Sohan Lal from Jaipur to perform in New York City.[79] Kathak was also circulating in New York among non-Indian dancers; in the 1940s, La Meri and Ragini Devi both performed their version of "Marwari Kathak" in New York City.[80]

Ram Gopal brought Kathak to London through his 1948 show *Dances of India*, which featured 18-year-old Kathak dancer Kumudini Lakhia.[81] Lakhia, who is currently an active choreographer in Ahmedabad, India, was keenly aware of how her exoticized image as an Indian dancer and of Gopal's production as a whole acted as the key point of accessibility for the largely white audiences of Europe (Shah 2005, 52). Still, a handful of non-Indians were inspired enough to take up Kathak training in India—Anisha Muni points out that some of the earliest resident Kathak dancers (as opposed to performers of "Oriental" or "Indian" dance generally) in the U.S. were non-Indians.[82] Muni's research shows non-Indian Kathak dancers traveling to learn Kathak in the U.S. as early as 1949. Nala Najan, Gina Lalli, and Shala Mattingly, all non-Indians, practiced Kathak in the U.S. well before immigration opened to Indians in 1965. Najan was inspired to train in Indian dance after watching a performance by Ruth St. Denis,[83] while

[78] "India Shines at the Dance Olympiad." *The Times of India (1861-current)*, Sep 08, 1936, pp. 5. *ProQuest*, https://search.proquest.com/docview/325337151?accountid=14512.
[79] Martin, John. "The Dance: Summertime." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Aug 13, 1939, pp. 1. *ProQuest*, https://search.proquest.com/docview/102838913?accountid=14512.
[80] Martin, John. "The Dance: Summertime." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Aug 04, 1940, pp. 110. *ProQuest*, https://search.proquest.com/docview/105472894?accountid=14512.
Martin, John. "The Dance: Ballets and Recitals." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Oct 15, 1944, pp. 1. *ProQuest*, https://search.proquest.com/docview/106965429?accountid=14512.
Martin, John. "The Dance: Gossip." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Jun 22, 1947, pp. 62. *ProQuest*, https://search.proquest.com/docview/107905602?accountid=14512.
[81] Shah, Reena. *Movement in Stills: The Dance and Life of Kumudini Lakhia*. Mapin Publishing Pvt Ltd, 2005.
[82] Muni, Anisha. "American Kathaks: Embodying Memory and Tradition in New Contexts." PhD thesis, City University of New York, Hunter College, 2018.
[83] "Nala Najan, 69, Advocate of Indian Dance." *New York Times*, February 5, 2002, https://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/05/arts/nala-najan-69-advocate-of-indian-dance.html. Accessed April 11, 2019.

Lalli was struck by and Uday Shankar performance in New York City.[84] Mattingly was taken with Kumudini Lakhia's above-mentioned performance in London as part of Ram Gopal's troupe (Shah 2005, 52-54). Kathak was present in the dance field of both London and Los Angeles through the 1950s and 1960s through the work of artists like these and Uday Shankar, Sushil Kumar, Marian Balchine (stage name Mrinalini) Hima Kesarcodi, Sundari Shridarani, and dancers from the touring troupe of the Kathak Kendra in Delhi.

While it is commonly thought that the first diasporic Indian Kathak dancers settled in the U.S. only after immigration opened in 1965, it seems that dancer Bhaskar Roy Chowdhury, born into a royal family in Chennai, India, permanently moved to the U.S. in 1955 and became a US citizen.[85] Bhaskar, as he was known on stage, trained in many dance styles including Kathak. His company, called Bhaskar – Dances of India, toured the U.S. His Kathak performances in the U.S. date back to 1956, when he performed two Kathak items titled *Mera's Dream* and *Thala Nirtham* at the Brooklyn Academy.[86] He also appeared in the part of a whirling dervish, no doubt informed by his Kathak training, in the 1956 film *The Adventures of Marco Polo*, and performed in Carnegie Hall in 1957 (Wingfield, 2013). Bhaskar remained in the U.S. until his death in 2003. After the expansion of immigration from 1965 onward, more Indian Kathak dancers settled permanently in the U.S., beginning with Anjani Ambegaokar in 1967[87] and followed by Chitresh Das in 1970.[88] Both Ambegaokar and Das have contributed significantly to the

[84] Faires, Robert. "In Memoriam: Gina Lalli." *The Austin Chronicle,* February 19, 2019, https://www.austinchronicle.com/daily/arts/2019-02-19/in-memoriam-gina-lalli/. Accessed April 11, 2019.
[85] Wingfield, Valerie. "Bhaskar Roy Chowdhury, Prince Among Dancers." *New York Public Library.* August 1, 2013, https://www.nypl.org/blog/2013/08/01/bhaskar-roy-chowdhury. Accessed April 15, 2019.
[86] Martin, John. "The Dance: Presenting Four Styles of Hindu Dance." *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Nov 25, 1956, pp. 151. *ProQuest*, https://search.proquest.com/docview/113678857?accountid=14512.
[87] "Anjani Ambegaokar." *National Endowment for the Arts*, https://www.arts.gov/honors/heritage/fellows/anjani-ambegaokar. Accessed March 22, 2018.
[88] Morelli, Sarah. "Intergenerational adaptation in north Indian Kathak dance." *Anthropological Notebooks* 16.3 (2010): 77-91.

proliferation of Kathak dance in California in particular—the lineages of these two gurus thrive in Los Angeles today.

I argue that the arrival of Kathak in the U.S. and the U.K. and the resulting growth of the form among Indian Americans and British Indians marks a moment of divergence in the social life of the dance.[89] In this new context, the dance's value, purpose, and identity went through a metamorphosis in response to the changing cultural and political conditions of diasporic life. In my study, I outline two different re-valuations of the dance: what I call the "heritage model" fixed Kathak to Indian national identity in an attempt to empower Indian diasporic subjects by underscoring their difference from the dominant cultural groups in American and British society, while the "integrative model" takes advantage of Kathak's flexibility to seek inclusion in American and British national culture. In outlining these models, I show how Kathak dancers and dance institutions both utilize the dance's flexibility *and* invest in strategic types of fixity as part of their negotiation of a diasporic Indian American or British Indian identity. First, I offer a brief exploration of the role of cultural production in the identity formation processes of diasporic subjects.

Cultural Production in the Diaspora: Heritage Model and Integrative model

As many scholars have shown, diasporic subjects use cultural productions like dance as a means of navigating identity and creating spaces of belonging under conditions of variegated citizenship that create structural hierarchies of belonging even within the same citizenry (Ong 1999, O'Shea 2007, Kedhar 2014, Pillai 2017), policies of aestheticized multiculturalism that gloss over the political, economic, and social inequities (Lowe 1996), and the shifting realities of

[89] Appadurai, Arjun. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge UP, 1986.

transnational public spheres that define diasporic life (Appadurai 1996). "Culture" in regard to its role in the formations of national identities is defined (in the American context) by Lisa Lowe as

> the medium of the present—the imagined equivalences and identifications through which the individual invents lived relationship with the national collective—but it is simultaneously the site that mediates the past, through which history is grasped as difference, as fragments, shocks, and flashes of disjunction. It is through culture that the subject becomes, acts, and speaks itself as 'American' (Lowe 1996, 3).

Culture is in constant flux, but as a social site in the context of nationhood, national culture can be used by dominant groups to establish and/or enforce a hegemony of a particular identity (in Lowe's example, 'Americanness') that seems fixed, singular, and shared. Srinivasan describes how dominant notions of national culture, again in the American context, create official hierarchies of belonging:

> Indian American dancers are dealing with at least two 'master' discourses of citizenship. The first is the cultural nationalism of South Asian communities in the United States; the second is the U.S. multicultural discourse, which seeks to divide minority communities, even as it celebrates their 'national' ethnic forms as the 'other' of mainstream practices (2011, 142).

My inquiry into Kathak and Indian diasporic identity is further built on Stuart Hall's understanding of identity as processual and constantly emergent.[90] According to Hall,

> instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production,' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematizes the very authority and the authenticity to which the term 'cultural identity' lays claim (1990, 222).

Identity, in other words, is a flexible process of becoming and of being, not a fixed or essential status. Hall argues that identity is responsive, and essentialist framings of cultural identity that are rooted in notions of pure or authentic origins are in fact just one of the ways that identity can

[90] Hall, Stuart. "Cultural identity and diaspora." In *Identity: community, culture, difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford. Lawrence & Wishart: 1990, pp. 222-237.

be shaped in response to shifting contexts. Like Benedict Anderson (1983) in *Imagined Communities*, Hall claims "we should not, for a moment, underestimate or neglect the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery which this conception of rediscovered, essential identity entails" (Hall 1990, 224). As I will explore in Chapter 1, the classicization of Kathak dance was part of project to "rediscover" an authentic Indian identity. Classicization can be read as an attempt to "restore an imaginary fullness or plentitude, to set against the broken rubric of [Indian colonial] past" (Hall 1990, 225). As a conscious effort to reframe identity, the modern act of classicization points again to the adaptable and constantly shifting nature of identity.

In other words, attempts to fix identity reveal identity's innate or at least potential flexibility. What allows us to slip between the two is the work of the imagination. As Appadurai has shown,

> modern subjectivity is essentially work of the imagination, and the construction of modern imagined selves and imagined worlds is informed by the effects of mass migration and mass mediations (of narratives, images, scripts, models). The work of the imagination is not entirely emancipated or entirely discipline—it is a site of constant contestation and reformulation […] the imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order" (1992, 31).

Imagination works on identity, shaping and reshaping it in response to unstable conditions of diasporic life. I look at how the work of the imagination informs certain notions of diasporic identity and therefore certain kinds of Kathak practice through my theorization of two models that define the dance's image, production, reception, and circulation: the heritage model and the integrative model.

The Heritage Model

In the heritage model of Kathak, I show how the dance is wound up in a project of propping up a singular notion of Indian identity that continues the imaginative work of the Indian

nationalist movement. In this model, it is not in the interest of diasporic subjects to acknowledge or invest in a heterogeneous, hybrid, or multiple conception of identity. As much of the literature on the Indian diaspora shows, investments in such imagined points of a fixed culture has been one way diasporic people have coped with the tensions of the individual "I" and the constructed "we" of Indian, American, and British national identifications in the mixed milieu. Though scholars like Maira (2012) and Bakrania (2013) have shown how young Indian Americans and British South Asians often create new forms of hybrid cultural productions and social performances as part of their navigation of diasporic life, Mankekar (2015) offers an important look at the other side of diasporic cultural production, in which the imaginary of the homeland defines and haunts diasporic subjects through regimes of affect. Mankekar argues that diasporic life is marked by a state of unsettlement, echoing the tension between "I" and "we." She shows how one of the responses to a state of unsettlement has been that some diasporic people invest in a phantasm of fixed, shared national origins as a way combating unsettlement. As will be discussed more in Chapter 2, I am applying Mankekar's formulation of the phantasm as an epistemological object that is imagined and socially constructed, but nevertheless has "material and tangible implications for lives and subjectivities" (Mankekar 2015, 73). Applying a theory of India as phantasm allows me to "avoid the trap of trying to locate a 'real' India and, therefore, of seeking originary truths or definitive meanings," while still representing certain dominant or fixed imaginings of what Indian culture is (Mankekar 2015, 106).

The symbolically loaded phantasm of "Indianness" charges transnational consumer products like movies, TV shows, clothing, and even groceries with affect and produces "webs of relationality between subjects" through their mutual investment in particular mass-mediated notions of "India" (Mankekar 2015, 14). Consuming these products reinforces a certain kind of

Indianness that is a result of a "collective imagining of India—of emotions, links, traditions, feelings and attachments that together continue to nourish a psychological appeal among successive generations of emigrants for the 'mother' country."[91] This collective imagining may be a response to the diffusion of people and culture in the transnational era and the sometimes resulting sense of unsettlement. In this context, Indian diasporic subjects are continually negotiating culturally dominant logics and their own continually cited difference from a minoritarian position. What is significant in the state of unsettlement among diasporic subjects is that the resulting conceptions of India they evoke in an attempt to find fixity in turn highlight the unsettled nature of "India" as a phantasm that is, to a degree, unrelated to the realities of India as nation-state. In the act of marking off the parameters of imagined India, these affective regimes show that India is in fact always emergent, inherently unsettled, formed by mediation, and subject to flux (Mankekar 2015, 239). Thus, a heritage model practice of Kathak that aims to fix a singular Indian identity reveals how identity is ultimately constructed and unstable.

The Integrative model

My study of an integrative model practice of Kathak, on the other hand, is informed by the work of scholars of Asian American studies like Lowe (1996) and Yutian Wong (2002), who have shown how Asian American cultural production can be a tool for immigrant and diasporic groups to work within and against their discursive constitution as Other. According to Lowe, "distance from the national culture constitutes Asian American culture as an alternative formation that produces cultural expressions materially and aesthetically at odds with the resolution of the citizen in the nation" (Lowe 1996, 4). It is in this marginalized but fertile

[91] Parekh, Bhikhu, Gurharpal Singh, and Steven Vertovec, eds. *Culture and economy in the Indian diaspora*. Routledge, 2003. Pg. 4.

alternative site that Asian Americans are able to recuperate terminated histories, forgotten memories, and forced silences. The alterity that is forced onto the Asian American subject enables her contestation, her ability to imagine different narratives**,** and her facility to enact "practices that give rise to new forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning the government of human life by the nation state" (Lowe 1996, 29).

Similarly, Yutian Wong's work shows how immigrant identities can be contested and reformulated through Asian American performance that creates an alternate social space where performers can grapple with questions of form, content, and process as markers of identity (Wong 2010, 38). Using the Vietnamese-American performance collective Club O'Noodles as her main case study, Wong explores how the ephemeral quality of dance, the heterogeneity of autobiographical memory, and the codes of pop culture can be used to call attention to the competing discourses of artifice and authenticity that define culture, questioning the fixity of temporality and geography in the process (Wong 2010, 85). The alternative modes of production and expression that Lowe and Wong describe flourish in a postnational order that Appadurai outlined as "a system based on relations between heterogeneous units," not an arrangement of monolithic, homogenous nations that are essentially distinct from one another. As I will show in Chapter 3, an integrative model of diasporic Kathak practice is enabled by dancers, advocates, and organizers who imagine complex and heterogeneous identities for Indian diasporic subjects and for Kathak dance in the transnational context. Integrative-model Kathak contests singular notions of national identity, using the dance to express new ways of imagining diasporic identity and to create new structures of national belonging. I've used the word "integrative" to describe this model to signal that cultural production in this context is still very much embedded within the hegemonies of culture in the nation-state that are interpellated by forces of commercialism,

consumption, and mass appeal (Appadurai 1996, 23). As I will explore in Chapter 3, practitioners of integrative model Kathak don't necessarily seek to overturn the hegemony of British or American national culture; rather, they insert themselves *into* those dominant frameworks, complicating them in the process.

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The various modes of navigating diasporic life through cultural production, whether it be the critical works of performance or the consumption of "authentic" goods, emerge "out of contradictions of immigrant marginality [and] displace the fiction of reconciliation" that masks the inequities of citizenship between cultural and racial groups (Lowe 1996, 9). Thus, both models of Kathak dance I explore in this dissertation reflect "immigrant acts," acts of agency, resistance, and survival in the face of dislocation and disidentification (Lowe 1996, 9). Both models also feature different arrangements of the three material conditions of diasporic life outlined by Lowe: heterogeneity (the diversity within meta-categories like "Asian American" and "black" in the British context), hybridity (cultural formations produced by histories of uneven power relations that demanded new forms of cultural self-preservation, such as those described by Maira and Bakrania), and multiplicity (the variety of ways these subjects are constituted by multiple axes of power simultaneously interacting with each other, such as the interaction between patriarchy, capitalism, and race relations) (Lowe 1996, 67). Multiplicity in particular echoes Brah's argument that identities like

> "Asian American" or "black" are "determined not so much by the nature of its referent but by its semiotic function within different discourses. These various meanings signal differing political strategies and outcomes. They mobilize different sets of cultural or political identities and set limits to where the boundaries of community are established

(Brah 1996, 102).

At the core of the two models of Kathak practice and identification I offer in this dissertation are the varied way these factors of heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity are recognized, resisted, deployed, and differentially related to each other to affirm certain types of cultural identities through the practice of Kathak dance. These models offer alternatives to the flattening effect of multiculturalism that "permits the present hegemony, a hegemony that relies on a premature reconciliation of contradiction and persistent distractions away from the historically established incommensurability of the economic, political, and cultural spheres" (Lowe 1996, 86). Through the specificity of the heritage model and integrative model, I am able to highlight some the motivations, relations of power, and social stakes behind the practices of Kathak dance that question the presumed commensurability of difference in the diaspora and underlines the processual, relational, and contradictory nature of identity formation.

SECTION III: Dance and Nationality

As a purposefully constructed icon of Indian nationalism, Kathak dance is an especially useful entry point into questions of national identity. The classical codes embedded in Kathak are part of a larger effort to choreograph Indian national identity through the practice of dance. Here I applying Susan Foster's theory of choreography as a "tradition of codes and conventions through which meaning is constructed in dance."[92] Choreography "resonates with cultural values concerning bodily, individual, and social identities […] [and] presents a structuring of deep and enduring cultural values that replicates similar sets of values elaborated in other cultural

[92] Foster, Susan Leigh. "Choreographies of gender." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 24.1 (1998): 1-33. Pg. 5.

practices" (Foster 1998, 5). In the example of Kathak, the structuring of cultural values through dance is quite explicit. The history of Kathak, as I've shown, reveals different choreographic turns in the cultural values and social identities attached to Kathak, alluding to the dance's capacity to shift and morph under different conditions of fixity.

The effects of Kathak's choreographic twists on questions of nationality play out on Indian dancing bodies. As many scholars have shown, the body is "an ideal site for the inscription of social disciplines" that produce knowledge about subjects and identity (Appadurai 1996, 67).[93] Indeed, the interaction of multiple axes of power in inscribing meaning on bodies does not merely suggest certain ways of knowing individuals; rather, these power relations *create* individuals as known objects based on entrenched formations of power and knowledge, as Michel Foucault argues (1977, 1976). But the process is by no means singular, and the effect is not necessarily monolithic. Foucault describes how multiple contradictory discourses, or ways of knowing, can circulate simultaneously, deployed strategically towards different ends that reflect a complex field of power relations in which the subject is ensnared (Foucault 1976, 100-101). Kathak practice in the diaspora exemplifies this theory of multiple discourses, as I will demonstrate through my analyses of heritage model and integrative model approaches to Kathak.

I follow the example of many dance studies scholars who have shown how movement interacts with shifting social and political contexts to affect corporeality and notions of national identity. In particular I build on theories of national corporeality suggested by Jens Giersdorf (2013) and Janet O'Shea (2007), who have both shown how certain kinds of national identities can be created and reinforced through a strategic disciplining of the body that produces national

[93] See also Mauss 1973, Foucault 1977, Bourdieu 1977, Foster 1998, Martin 1998.

subjects in nascent nations. While Giersdorf[94] focused on how strategic state choreographies "corporeally generated" an ideal, homogenous East German "body of the people," O'Shea[95] looked at two distinct schools of Bharatanatyam practice in India to analyze how variegated ways of knowing and being can emerge even within hegemonic nationalist agendas (Giersdorf 2013, 4, 25; O'Shea 2007). She demonstrates how the revival period of Bharatanatyam was marked by "divergent interpretations of form, history, and identity [expressed] in choreography," interpretations that supported an Indian national identity that was heterogeneous (O'Shea 2007, 10).

I suggest that these "divergent interpretations" signal a kind of flexibility of identity that also exists in Kathak's history. However, Mitra[96] has argued that the violent effects of dominant discourses of national identity on the corporeality of dancing women cannot be understated. She characterizes the revival period of Indian classical dance as a time when styles like Bharatanatyam and Kathak were reformulated as nationalist, Brahmanic dances. She argues that previously responsive and flexible corporealities affiliated with devadasi practice ossified into "highly skilled and visually stunning spectacle[s] representative of a chaste motherland" (Mitra 2006, 76). She diverges from O'Shea in her conception of corporeality in Indian classical dance, which Mitra describes as fixed under one discursive frame of sexually chaste womanhood, rather than as multiple, shifting, or responsive. The power of this discursive frame represses heterogeneous expressions of sexuality and womanhood, but it also produces an authoritative, mythic identity of virtuous Indianness.

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[94] Giersdorf, Jens Richard. *The Body of the People: East German Dance Since 1945*. University of Wisconsin Pres, 2013

[95] O'shea, Janet. *At home in the world: Bharata Natyam on the global stage*. Wesleyan University Press, 2007.

[96] Mitra, Royona. "Living a body myth, performing a body reality: Reclaiming the corporeality and sexuality of the Indian female dancer." *Feminist review* 84.1 (2006): 67-83.

My study on Kathak dance practice in the diaspora explores both of these possibilities for Indian classical dance—its ability to fix individual identity to dominant notions of what it means to be Indian, *and* its ability to act as a tool through which diasporic subjects can explore alternative, heterogenous notions of national identity (Hall 1990). As described by O'Shea, Hélène Kringelbach (2013), and Francesca Castaldi (2006) among others, dancers are agents who negotiate shifting, interlocking, and improvised relations of power that shape questions of national identity. Castaldi's[97] description of a polyrhythmic model of power, for instance, "contrasts with the hierarchical model in which relationships of power follow a linear and centralized mode of transmission and with a rhizomic model that conceptualizes a network of egalitarian relations without a center" to instead show how nationality and corporeality are constituted by non-homologous relations of power with differentiated degrees of agency (Castaldi 2006, 8). This polyrhythmic model goes beyond Foucault's theory of power to encompass discursive formations *and* resistance to those formations. I similarly underscore the "active participation of all players" in the shifting field of power and knowledge that determines national identity and corporeality in the Indian diasporic context (Castaldi 2006, 8).

Following the work of Cristina Rosa (2015) and Melissa Blanco Borelli (2015), I look at how individual dancers and collective dance practices may challenge or exploit fixed identifications and dominant discourses of nationality. Rosa[98] points out how "flexible choreographies of (self-) identification" allow people to inhabit new imagined communities formulated against dominant discourses of cultural identity. In her example of the "*ginga* aesthetic" as a type of choreography of identification, Rosa shows how Afro-Brazilian dancers

[97] Castaldi, Francesca. *Choreographies of African identities: Négritude, dance, and the National Ballet of Senegal*. University of Illinois Press, 2006.
[98] Rosa, Cristina F. *Brazilian bodies and their choreographies of identification: Swing nation*. Springer, 2015.

are able to construct a new self around Africanist epistemologies and aesthetic principles as a political turn away from colonial frames of knowledge about and power over Brazilian people (Rosa 2015, 16). While the classicization of Kathak dance can be read as a flexible choreography of identification that reshaped Indian identity against colonial ways of knowing through dance, I am more interested in how Indian diasporic subjects similarly use Kathak to choreograph identities within and against dominant notions of Indian nationalism, alongside American and British nationalism. In looking at how diasporic Kathak dancers engage with hegemonic discourses of Indian identity, I build on Borelli's[99] work that affirms the situational agency of dancers to take up opportunities for self-authorship, pleasure, and discursive contestation. Her theoretical model of "hip(g)nosis" recognizes the power/knowledge bind in which, in her example, Cuban mulata women find themselves repeatedly represented and produced as known, tragic subjects, and privileges the choices these women actually have to navigate and dialogue with these limiting discursive formations (Borelli 2015, 20).

Anusha Kedhar looks at a similar kind of strategic navigation in her study of diasporic dance practice and transnational professionalization.[100] Drawing from Aiwha Ong's theory of the "flexible citizen" who maneuvers within and against structures of nationalism and neoliberalism to accumulate capital (Ong 1999), Kedhar shows how South Asian diasporic dancers exercise distinct kinds of flexibility in their pursuit of paid work within the fixed limits of immigration law. She outlines a central paradox: the desire for the labor of transnational dancing bodies is at odds with the limits of immigration and citizenship these dancers face. This paradox demands strategies of flexibility for transnational dancers to survive (Kedhar 2014, 38).

[99] Borelli, Melissa Blanco. *She is Cuba: a genealogy of the mulata body*. Oxford University Press, 2016.
[100] Kedhar, Anusha. "Flexibility and its bodily limits: Transnational South Asian dancers in an age of neoliberalism." *Dance Research Journal* 46.1 (2014): 23-40.

Kedhar's theory of flexibility has shaped the way I think about diasporic Kathak dance as an "embodied response to the contradictions and unevenness of globalization" (Kedhar 2014, 24). However, the key difference is that while Kedhar focuses on the negotiation and accumulation of power and capital in the field of professionalized dance, I look at how flexibility within the form of Kathak itself is deployed in the context of debates about national identity and belonging. The two are linked of course; in Chapter 2 I examine how heritage-oriented practices of Kathak are linked to the consolidation of local power among Indian diasporic communities, while in Chapter 3 I show how paid opportunities in the Kathak field play into an integrative model of identification that facilitates a different kind of belonging and recognition.

Like Kedhar, Srinivasan considers South Asian diasporic dance as a form of labor that lays bare the unstable nature of (racialized) citizenship (2011). According to Srinivasan,

> because the terms of citizenship are in constant motion, turning to dance as an unrecognized form of labor critiques the discourses through which citizenship has been constructed […] considering the Indian dancer as transnational laborer offers a non-dualistic approach in thinking about binaries of self-other, migrant-citizen, foreigner-native, and transnational-national from an embodied racialized, gendered perspective (Srinivasan 2011, 168).

Srinivasan marries a study of Indian classical dance—specifically, Bharatanatyam—as a symbol of cultural difference with an analysis of how "dance, a long-standing and reliable source for the authentic connection between motion and emotion, is now being commandeered as a site for the manufacture of authenticity."[101] Though my study does not specifically define dance through the lens of labor within a commodity marketplace, I show how diasporic practices of Kathak engage with concepts of fixity and flexibility and thus invest in or interrogate constructions of Indian authenticity and the cultural capital attached to these constructions. I focus on differing appraisals of Kathak in the heritage and integrative models to explore how "dance is acquiring a

[101] Foster, Susan. *Valuing Dance: Commodities and Gifts in Motion.* Oxford University Press: 2019. Pg. 6.

new array of values within the global marketplace where it can function as a potent signifier for an authentic home, vitality, belonging, or transcendence of the ordinary" (Foster 2019, 7).

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These scholars and many others have shown how the body reacts to, interacts with, and is acted upon by intersections of knowledge and power that are shifting, multilayered, and contestable. My study contributes to this body of work by interrogating similar themes of discursive power and individual agency 1) against the backdrop of the classicization of Kathak and the related formalization of Indian national identity, 2) in the context of the Indian diaspora, and 3) within the formal qualities and aesthetic philosophies of Kathak dance itself.

SECTION IV: Methodologies

I write this dissertation from my position as a first generation Indian-American woman who was raised in Kathak dance practice in Los Angeles. I identify as a Kathak dancer, an Indian diasporic subject, a Los Angeles native, and a critical dance studies researcher. My work is influenced and informed by my two decades of training in Lucknow gharana Kathak that took place under my aunt Rachana Upadhyay, with whom I shared a semi-traditional *guru-shishya* or teacher-disciple relationship. At the same time, my own experience of Kathak has developed from a close and protected practice that took place inside a family home to a transnational experience that has connected me with dancers from around the world through mobile training

opportunities and through the momentous impact of social media in fostering an international Kathak community.

My dissertation fieldwork comes from an IRB-approved, interdisciplinary approach consisting of a mixture of methods that include ethnography (primarily interviews and participant-observation), choreographic analysis, discourse analysis, and critical geography. I've applied these methods to analyze Kathak in the three main case-study institutions, as performed by their affiliated dancers, teachers, and advocates: the Indian classical dance and music school Bharatiya Vidhya Bhavan (London), the South Asian dance production house Akādemi (London), and the Kathak school/dance company the Leela Institute for the Arts (Los Angeles). These institutions have been chosen for the strength of their presence in their respective cities, the size of their student/dancer body, and the significant ways in which they exemplify a heritage model or an integrative model practice of Kathak—or, in the case of the Leela Institute, both.

The bulk of my fieldwork is based in interviews and participant-observation within the Kathak communities of London and Los Angeles. In speaking with dancers and dance teachers, I raised questions about the relationship these individuals have with Kathak, and how this relationship speaks to the tension between porous cultural borders in the diaspora, and the pressure to maintain an "authentic" Indian identity. In the next three chapters, a myriad of voices will emerge: I spoke to senior Kathak students, amateur and semi-professional[102] dancers from the Bhavan, Akādemi, and the Leela Institute, as well as Kathak teachers and lead administrators from these organizations and others. In speaking with these individuals, my goal has been to understand some of the different communal values associated with Kathak, and how those values

[102] I say semi-professional dancers because almost none of my interviewees were making a full living off their Kathak practice at the time of interview.

mediate and are informed by notions of various national and cultural identities with which they affiliate themselves.

I've also taken part in diverse Kathak classes and workshops in both London and Los Angeles to explore how notions of identity are embedded within the practices of pedagogy, choreography, and training in a range of contexts. I draw from Wong's analysis of the rehearsal space as a key site of identity negotiation-in-process to look at what kind of discourse and characterizations of Indian, Indian-American, and British-Indian identity are circulated explicitly or implicitly offstage (Wong 2010). The role of the teacher is key here; Stacey Prickett's work on the nature of teacher-student relationships in the British-Indian classical dance context is helpful as an analytical starting point for considering how values and ideas about identity are embedded within the systems of teaching and learning (2007). I have taken part in training sessions with teachers who are immigrants from India (such as Abhay Shankar Mishra, Alpana Sen Gupta, and Nilima Devi), teachers who are 2nd generation Indians born abroad (such as Rina Mehta and Smita Alves), and guest teachers who reside in India (such as Birju Maharaj, Saswati Sen, and Kum Kum Dhar) but frequently travel internationally to teach dance, to consider how the migration histories of these different teachers play into the presence of affective India and construct notions of Indian identity in the studio. As a longtime Kathak dancer, I am equipped to observe the pedagogy of the classroom, how technique is taught and transmitted, and how the ideas and embodiments circulated in the training space affect identity in the quotidian social sphere.

Alongside my research in the classroom/rehearsal space, I have also observed Kathak performances in both London and Los Angeles—including live and recorded events—to see how the dance is framed in relation to national identity on the public stage. I focus on performances

organized by the Bhavan and Akādemi in London, by the Leela Institute in Los Angeles, and by individual dancers affiliated with those organizations. Performance venues range from prestigious concert stages, to outdoor public spaces, to South Asian community events, to in-studio presentations. On one level, I've observed the actual dancing onstage to consider how choreographic decisions related to repertoire, spatial arrangement, set design, lighting, costuming, and casting enact various identity positions in different environmental contexts. On another level, I've compared the discourse emanating from the stage in the form of politically suggestive verbal announcements, introductory remarks, translations, and program notes—a kind of verbal or written choreography that is often part and parcel of Kathak performances—to the often-contradictory discourse circulating backstage to consider the situational nature of identity performance that defines diasporic life. My analysis includes performances from the Bhavan's Republic Day, Independence Day, World Dance Day, and Summer School Finale events, as well as solo debut performances by senior dancers; Akādemi concerts *Bells* and *Paradiso* as well as multimedia related to their *Dance Well* health program; and the Leela Institute's performances of *Speak* and *En Route*.

I have studied textual materials, visual materials, performances, and written or verbal statements as a way to analyze the imagery and discourse of Kathak dance that circulates in different communities and organizations. Foucault describes discourse as power-laden formations of meaning and knowledge that set the parameters of language as well as thought (Foucault 1976). Discursive formations often operate in hidden and subliminal ways, defining how we think, act, and speak in daily life based on certain rules. Part of my work looks at Kathak dance as a discursive formation based on the rules of institutions ranging from small-scale teachers in the diaspora to national governments themselves. Similarly, I consider how the

identity categories of "Indian," "British," "American," and any related hyphenated combinations are produced and delimited in relation to discursive formations of nation and culture.

This study is framed as a conversation between two cities in two different countries; therefore, I allude to theories from critical geography in my consideration of how cultural production intersects with location-specific identity politics to create, reinforce, and dismantle hegemonic ways of being in different places. I look at how a politics of scale that considers the position of diasporic subjects in local communities, cities, nations, and the international sphere can serve as a "means of constraint and exclusion, a means of imposing identity," as well as a "weapon of expansion and inclusion, a means of enlarging identity" (Smith 1992, 78). This interdisciplinary approach allows me to engage with multiple dimensions of Kathak in aesthetic, social, and political terms in two major diasporic locations while recognizing how the specific realities of those locations might impact how Kathak dance is linked or unlinked to national identity.

SECTION V: Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: Flexibility and Fixity in Kathak

My first chapter sets out the foundational elements of Kathak dance that I argue define the form in the broadest sense—namely, the adherence to a cyclical rhythmic structure known as *taal*, and the evocation of accessible and moving *rasa*, or shared emotional experience. I then describe the three key tenets of flexibility that I suggest are built into Kathak and enable a diasporic Kathak dancer to negotiate multiple identities and perhaps even transcend their quotidian social identifications through the act of dancing. These tenets include 1) improvisation,

or the dancer's ability to express individual tastes and interests through improvised movement, 2) creative interpretation, or the agency of the dancer in interpreting narrative or poetic material, and 3) *riyaaz*, the rigorous daily practice through which dancers are able to assert or transcend their sense of self. I frame these three flexible tenets within the boundaries of taal and rasa, showing how flexibility is defined by fixed parameters *and* demonstrating how fixed parameters create crucial points of reference and departure for the exercise of flexibility.

The second part of Chapter 1 complicates the tenets of flexibility by showing how contextual conditions of fixity beyond the formal structures of taal and rasa limit the flexible potential of Kathak. I tell the story of Kathak's classicization to show how Kathak was reframed by the nationalist project in post-Independence India. I also briefly examine some of the ways the dance has been standardized through the production of dance syllabi and certificates that consolidate the practice into known rubrics that are nationally and internationally legible. Both classicization and standardization were massive and conscious efforts to fix Kathak, but, as I will show, these endeavors paradoxically rely on Kathak's transformative ability to suit changing contexts and needs.

Chapter 2: Fixing Kathak Dance Through the Heritage Model

Chapter 2 draws on the case studies of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan London branch and the Leela Institute for the Arts in Los Angeles to lay out a heritage model practice of Kathak dance concerned with reinforcing and circulating fixed notions of identity that are tethered to the past. Introducing a new conception of diasporic Kathak dance as an inalienable practice, I draw from Annette Weiner's theory of inalienable possessions (1992) to show how both the Bhavan and the Leela Institute frame Kathak as ontologically bound to a certain idea of authentic cultural

origins. The two institutions are quite different in how they do this—the Bhavan ties Kathak to their conception of Indian "Culture" that is defined by Hinduism, guru-shishya parampara, and affective investments in a phantasmic India of the past, while the Leela Institute ties Kathak to past through their framing of a very particular dance lineage as the key marker of authenticity in a replication of the gharana concept. In both cases, Kathak is caught up in a project of affirming singular, authentic histories.

Chapter 3: Kathak "Flexes" in the Integrative Model

In this chapter I outline an integrative model of Kathak dance that counters monolithic constructions of Indian identity as standing *apart* from British and American identity. I look at how both the Leela Institute and the London-based dance production house Akādemi use Kathak to integrate into and claim space within the broader cultural milieu of Los Angeles and London, respectively. Both organizations engage with alternative pathways into Kathak dance through strategic collaborations and site-specific choreographies that exercise Kathak's flexibility in different ways. I want to note that in this dissertation, I purposefully look at the Leela Institute as both an example of a heritage model approach to Kathak *and* an integrative model approach to Kathak; Leela deploys a discourse of fixity in the context of establishing a lineage for their practice, but they also engage with Kathak's flexibility in their pursuit of new audiences and platforms. Leela's example underscores my idea that heritage model and integrative model approaches are not mutually exclusive to one another. Rather, through the course of these chapters, I underline how organizations and individuals strategically align with contradictory models of Kathak in different contexts as part of a larger negotiation of cultural identity in the diaspora. While I have separated the fuller discussion of the heritage model and the integrative

model into two chapters for analytical clarity, these models are constantly in conversation with each other in actual Kathak practice.

Chapter 1

Flexibility and Fixity in Kathak Dance

Kathak dance has taken many variant forms over the last several centuries, as described in the Introduction. I argue that this diversity of purpose, repertoire, and discourse illustrates the dance's inherent flexibility *and* reveals its moments of fixity. In this chapter, I will take a broad look at the form to identify the key elements that make Kathak a flexible dance, as well as the politically-motivated efforts to limit those flexible elements in favor of a fixed practice of Kathak. I begin the chapter by offering a description of what I argue to be the two main structuring elements of the dance form: *taal*, or circular rhythmic cycles, and *rasa*, the development of shared emotional experience between the audience and the dancer. I suggest that these two fixed structures both enable and limit Kathak's flexibility. I will then outline the key repertoire of the dance as part of my explication of Kathak's flexibility with respect to the structures of taal and rasa. I identify three interconnected tenets of flexibility embedded in Kathak repertoire:

1) improvisation, through which individual dancers are able to explore and stretch foundational elements of the dance like rhythm and story with spontaneity and personal flair,

2) creative interpretation, which allows individual dancers to traverse and complicate their subjective identities as part of abhinaya, the danced act of storytelling, and

3) riyaaz, the rigorous daily practice that, under ideal conditions, enables the dancer to transcend quotidian identifications through an immersion in the dance that facilitates an ego-dissolving state of flow.[103]

The second half of this chapter begins to look at some of the contextual fixities that limit the flexible potential of Kathak. The politically and socially motivated boundaries placed on the dance affect the way diasporic Kathak dancers learn, perform, and talk about Kathak in the specific contexts of London and Los Angeles. I will show how one of the most powerful ways in which Kathak has been fixed has been the process of its official classicization in India, which positioned the dance as first and foremost a symbol of a (strategically constructed) national heritage during the post-Independence era, which then allowed for the consolidation of its international image as a canonized form. Kathak's classical designation has had a monumental impact on limiting the flexible and individualized qualities of Kathak; I address the long-term effects of classicization in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. I close out this chapter with a brief look at how attempts to standardize Kathak through the creation of organized syllabi and certificate programs can be seen as both an act of fixity and as an exercise of Kathak's flexibility towards the goal of making the dance legible in diasporic contexts.

SECTION I: Taal and Rasa as the Foundations of Kathak

Taal and *rasa* inform all aspects of Kathak performance, from abstract displays of technique to immersive moments of mimetic storytelling. Together, taal and rasa encompass some of the key aesthetic values that I argue undergird Kathak practice, such as the search for

[103] Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, Sami Abuhamdeh, and Jeanne Nakamura. "Flow." *Flow and the foundations of positive psychology*. Springer, Dordrecht, 2014. 227-238.

variety, ornamentation, and individual creativity within an expansive but codified structure of expression.

Taal

The word *taal* comes from *taali*, which means clap or hand-clap. Taal refers to the rhythmic meter of the music that determines the variant ways time can be divided in a piece of music. Taals are cyclical and continuous, anchoring the performers in a set architecture of rhythm. As Sushil Saxena noted, "every detail of a Kathak recital […] is visibly related at least to rhythm."[104] For example, one of the most popular musical meters for Kathak performance is *teen taal*, a 16-beat time cycle divided into four parts of four beats each. This taal would begin at beat 1, continue until beat 16, then repeat from beat 1 again. When reciting this taal, beats 1, 5, and 13 would be emphasized with a hand clap, while beat 9 would be marked with a silent wave of the hand to note the de-emphasized part of the cycle. Thus, teen taal features three (*teen*) claps (*taali)*.

In Kathak music, taal is marked and held by a repeated melodic pattern called *lehera.*[105] Lehera can be played on a variety of melodic instruments, most commonly the sarangi or sitar, or on the harmonium. Taal can be rendered at any speed (*laya)*, at the discretion of the lead performer. In a Kathak performance, the dancer is the lead performer, and she determines the progression of the taal's speed between slow (*vilambit),* medium (*madhya*) and fast *(drut*). The taal is set by the dancer through the clap-marked vocal recitation of *theka*, or the rhythmic syllables (*bols*) related to the taal. The cadence and spacing of these syllables, coupled with the

[104] Saxena, Sushil Kumar. *Swinging Syllables: Aesthetics of Kathak Dance.* Sangeet Natak Akademi: 1993. Pg. 31.
[105] Ranade, Ashok Damodar. *Music Contexts: A Concise Dictionary of Hindustani Music*. Bibliophile South Asia, 2006.

division of beats into discrete sections, gives each taal its distinct character and personality. For example, *ektaal* and *chautaal* are both 12-beat time cycles, but they have distinct theka patterns with differently emphasized parts.[106] The weight of the bols and their division into sections is different in each taal, giving them each a unique *ang* or sense of shape and body (Saxena 1993, 26). Shovana Narayan describes her perception of the personalities a few popular taals in Kathak:

> Even the talas evoke its characteristic mood and rasa. For example, *teental* or *trital* is romantic, serene, and wholesome, while *dhamar* is grave and somber. Similarly, the *chautal* is deep and dense while *ektal* is light-hearted, even though both denote cycles of twelve beats. Thus, while performing Kathak the dancer has to pay particular attention to the right usage of the tala according to the text.[107]

Key to Kathak dance is the concept of *sum*, or the first beat of any taal. Sum can be thought of as both the beginning and the end of the time cycle, the peak beat of highest emphasis. Most[108] Kathak compositions[109] begin *and* end at sum, completing a full rhythmic and melodic circle. These compositions can spread out over several cycles of a taal, but always end at sum. As Reginald and Jamila Massey write, "it is impossible to miss the sum, for it is always pointed with a sense of achievement and satisfaction."[110] In Kathak dance, the moment is marked by sharp, dramatic, complex, and triumphant postures that are almost exclusively used at the moment of sum. In these postures, the arms, legs, and other body parts are often comported just before the moment of sum hits, with only the face moving sharply into place as that first beat

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[106] For a detailed description of ek taal and chautaal, as well as other popular taals in Kathak, see Appendix A.
[107] Narayan, Shovana. *Kathak: rhythmic echoes and reflections*. Roli Books, 1998. Pg. 108.
[108] Narayan notes that while most compositions begin and end on sum, there are three other types of rare compositions that do not finish on sum: *atit* compositions that end of the beat after sum, *anaghat* compositions that end on the beat before sum, and *visham* compositions that end on the third beat of the taal (Narayan 1998, 110).
[109] Saxena chooses to collectively refer to the different kinds of rhythmic compositions in Kathak as "intra-forms," which he argues better represents these compositions as both having their own distinct form *and* being part of a larger rhythmic form which is the overarching taal (Saxena 1993, 31). In this study I use the more common referent "composition" to describe these same rhythmic patterns and types of patterns.
[110] Massey, Reginald, and Jamila Massey. *The dances of India: a general survey and dancers' guide*. South Asia Books, 1989. Pgs. 34-35.

falls. Reaching sum is a moment of fulfillment and gratification that assures the performers and audience that the music and the dance are in harmony. At the end of a long and/or rhythmically intricate composition or footwork series that may carry on through several cycles of taal, arriving at sum with clean precision is often met with applause and appreciation for the dancer's sense of rhythmic control (*layakari*) from both viewers and musical accompanists.

The taal can be understood as the overarching temporal structure upon which the performance is built. But as Leela Venkataraman points out, "that Kathak dancer dances a tala, rather than to a tala."[111] The dancer can echo the pacing and personality of the taal, or she can explore the taal, testing its limits, challenging its natural cadences. In Saxena's words, "within and upon the unceasing flow of laya [rhythm] the dancer is able to work up the more or less articulate beauty of form, expression, and rhythmic utterance not only in accordance with audience reactions, but in response to the friendly challenges or stimuli that may come from the drummer" (Saxena 1993, 69). All of this happens *within* the structure of the taal, consistently in reference and/or deference to the rhythm of the cycle. Any rhythmic deviations return back at sum, the anchoring point for both the performers and the audience.

Thus, a circular sense of journey and return is embedded in Kathak dance through its bond with cycles of taal. To arrive at sum is to arrive back at the starting place. It involves a recognition of limits, of fixed points of beginning and ending, even as it allows for immense travel and flexible experimentation in between. As the container for the journey of a performance, the taal acts as both a productive point of departure and a legible point of return for the dancer and the audience. It is the perfect illustration of how flexibility is defined and enabled by certain structural limits. I will describe some of the ways in which the fixed taal of a

[111] Venkataramna, Leela, and Avinash Pasricha. *Indian Classical Dance: Tradition in Transition*. Roli Books, 2005. Pg. 54.

performance enables the flexible expression of the individual dancer in upcoming sections on improvisation, creative interpretation, and riyaaz.

Rasa

A key part of classical Indian dance is the evocation of *rasa*, or the communal mood elicited among spectators by the dancer through nuanced physical interpretation (*abhinaya)* of codified emotions or mental states (*bhava*). Put simply, rasa is the mood or feeling theoretically invoked among audience members (and the dancer) by the dancer's performance; it is psycho-somatic state that is "embodied and experiential […] triggered in audiences by their encounter with a performer's gestural codes of performance."[112] It's place in the theory and practice of the classical Indian arts is so central that Puru Dhadheech equated it with the place that "beauty" holds in Western aesthetics.

Rasa is rooted in a codified aesthetic theory laid out in the *Natya Sastra* performance treatise, dating back to the 2nd century B.C.E., that focuses on the creation of a "unified emotional core" of a performance through the combinations of distinct ingredients.[113] As Kalpana Ram describes,

> *Ras* is the juice that is extracted, it is that which is tasty, and the *Natya Sastra* makes vivid use of the cooking process as one closely analogous to performance—bringing the raw materials (vegetables and meats) to a distinct flavor through the application of techniques (cooking with spices and sauces). At the same time the flavour that is to be brought out as the *ras* of performance entails an intertwining or crossing over of the senses.[114]

The raw materials in a performance are the *bhava* or sentiment expressed by the dancer;

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[112] Mitra, Royona. "Decolonizing Immersion: Translation, spectatorship, rasa theory and contemporary British dance." *Performance Research* 21.5 (2016): 89-100. Pg 92.

[113] Pollock, Sheldon. *A rasa reader: Classical Indian aesthetics*. Columbia University Press, 2016.

[114] Ram, Kalpana. "Dancing the Past Into Life: The Rasa, Nrtta and Rāga of Immigrant Existence." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 11.2 (2000): 261-273. Pg. 266.

for instance, the emotions of various mythological characters—Radha's sorrow, Ravana's anger, and Kama's humor—can all be different bhavas the dancer could express through the application of certain dance techniques. Primary among these techniques is *abhinaya*, or the use of mimetic movement, symbolic hand gestures, and facial expressions to share a narrative or evoke a feeling. Emotion can also be expressed through body movements based on *nritta*, or abstract dance movements. The quality of the movement—whether it is sharp or languid, gradual or jolting, light or heavy—can lend emotion to the underlying rhythm and can contribute to the development of a particular rasa without explicit representation of images or characters. In Kathak, the dancer has great flexibility to improvise movements and depictions that lend themselves to the creation of rasa, just as the dancer has great flexibility in ornamenting the taal. I will discuss the ways in which dancers are able to express individual creativity and personality in their development of rasa through abhinaya and nritta in an upcoming section on creative interpretation.

As Richard Schechner has described, rasa is produced through a *transformation* of bhava (2001). The *Natya Sastra* identifies eight main rasas that a performance can evoke, along with the corresponding bhava[115] that acts as the raw material for the production of distinct rasas: *shringaram* (the erotic, linked to the bhava of desire), *hasyam* (the comic, linked to the bhava of amusement), *karunam* (the tragic, linked to the bhava of grief), *veeram* (the heroic, linked to the bhava of determination), *bhayanakam* (the fearful or, linked to the bhava of fear), *bhibhatsam* (the grotesque, linked to the bhava of disgust), *raudram* (the violent, linked to the bhava of anger), and *adbhutam* (the fantastic, linked to the bhava of wonder) (Pollock 2016, 50). The philosopher Abhinavagupta added a ninth rasa in the 10th century C.E.: *shanta rasa* (the peaceful,

[115] Here I am referring only to *sthyai bhava*, which are considered the various mood that reside permanently within all humans, what Dhadheech calls "natural instincts" (Dhadheech 2016, 57).

which Abhinavagupta linked to the bhava of "true knowledge") (Pollock 2016, 193). Collectively, these nine rasas are known today as the *navarasa*, though it is commonly understood among contemporary Kathak practitioners that much nuance exists between these compartmentalized rasa categories.

To evoke the broader mood of shringaram,[116] for example, the dancer would engage with the raw feelings of desire, lust, sexual passion, etc., transforming them through dance[117] into an immersive and communal experience of shringaram rasa that envelopes both the performer and the audience. However, it is important to note that the dancer herself does not have to sincerely feel an emotion to effectively and skillfully evoke that feeling in the audience through the development of rasa—from a technical perspective, she simply needs to proficiently perform the aesthetic codes correlated to the given bhava, which ideally engenders the desired rasic effect. Indeed, the *Natya Sastra* and the constellation of aesthetic philosophies attached to it generally indicate that the dancer should maintain an anti-naturalist approach, which means their aim is not to internalize the actual emotion to be represented, since this can actually inhibit her performance by curtailing her ability to nimbly transition from one emotional state to another, as might be required in a given composition. On the contrary, cultivating a strategic distance between one's internal state and external stylized expression allows the dancer a modicum of control relative to the aesthetic representation, while enhancing the spectator's perception of her virtuosity. Still, dancers can and do engage with moments of what is called *sattvika abhinaya*, or the expression of emotions directly felt by the dancer. A dancer may, for example, begin to actually cry from a

[116] While shringaram originally refers to the erotic, many iterations of Kathak post-classicization have described shringaram in more generalist terms of love, which can include love for a romantic partner as well as feelings of non-romantic or non-sexual desire, including devotion or the "desire for God" (Pollock 2016, 22). Much of this change in the perception of what shringaram means has to do with the Sanskritization of Kathak that attempt to cleanse the dance of its relationship to sensual entertainment.

[117] The techniques through which a dancer can express and transform bhava into rasa are discussed in more specificity in an upcoming section on creative interpretation.

real swell of internal grief when portraying the sadness of a forgotten Radha waiting for her beloved Krishna to return from the company of another woman. But generally speaking, the dancer is trained to *evoke* different bhava rather than actually feel them.

Rasa is gradually built through the progression of a performance. It is not "a mere moment of relish, but a […] *process* of enjoyment" as Saxena notes (1993, 180; emphasis in original). He goes on to describe how "rasa is no everyday enjoyment. It appears wondrous, for is sets us free (for a while) of the limitations of space-time and you-and-I, and is untroubled by the pressures of life, and by apprehension or desire. Further, here we feel we are at one with, and not merely opposed to or looking at, the aesthetic object" (Saxena1993, 180). According to Mitra, this potential for freedom, flexibility, and communion available through a rasic experience enables an "interventionist aesthetic and an embodied, political and philosophical way of thinking and being within oneself (that) ultimately shapes interactions with others" (Mitra 2015, 15). Thus, rasa as an aesthetic theory goes far beyond the simple codification of emotions. Ideally, it introduces a sensorial and immersive method of connection between artist, art, and audience.

The motivation behind the creation of rasa is the requirement that the dancer *share* in something with the audience, rather than simply present or display something for the audience's passive consumption. In a form like Kathak, which highlights abstraction as well as the representational modes of poetic elaboration and storytelling, rasa is the special ingredient that differentiates the dance from a didactic, one-dimensional apparatus designed purely for the unilinear transmission of information. A quick anecdote to illustrate this point—when performing on proscenium stages, Kathak dancers will often request that the house lights be turned on so that the dancer can see and interact with the audience. The connection with the audience is important

to a form that revolves around the creation of rasa, and Kathak's unique intimacy and informality, in turn, allows for such direct communication. A successful performance can be measured by what the audience is able to feel and relate to in the dance event—therefore, there is a significant investment on the part of the dancer to reach the audience on an emotional level.[118] The "shared discourse of emotion enables communion between the performer and audience" when the performer is able to speak to and with the audience effectively.[119]

Standard training protocols encourage the dancer to embrace the goal of taking the audience with her to that transformative emotional realm through skillful performance of bhava that produces potent rasa. I argue that this concept of sharing a transformative affective experience with audience members through rasa suggests a mandate of universality inherent in the very philosophy of the dance form itself. The purpose of Kathak as an art form, in dominant discursive framings, goes beyond the individual motives or interests of dancers, teachers and curators. Kathak must ideally generate a shared, transcendental experience that binds the performer and the audience. In other words, "the effectiveness of the performance depends very much on an active response from the partakers. The [*Natya Sastra*] is very emphatic in its insistence that *natya* [drama, of which dance is considered a part] appeal to people of all stations in life, affecting different people differently" (Schechner 2001, 33).

Virtuosic performance is measured by how well the audience is able to grasp the mood and flavor that the performer is trying to share. Rasa theory posits that the audience is as much a

[118] I should note here that the notion of emotional communion that underlies the theory of rasa is exactly that—a theory. Contemporary understandings of rasa are not based on empirical evidence that points to the existence or efficacy of emotional communion; rather, rasa theory is a shared cultural assumption that shapes the production and reception of Kathak and other classical Indian dances.

[119] Coorlawala, Uttara Asha. "It matters for whom you dance: Audience participation in Rasa Theory." *Dance Matters: Performing India on Local and Global Stages*, edited by Pallabi Chakravorty and Nilanjana Gupta, Routledge, 2012, 117-139. Pg. 128.

part of the dance creation process as the dancer, choreographer, or musician. The audience member is a *rasika*, a taster, a "discerning onlooker" (Saxena 1993, 180). Ideally, the spectator is educated in the codes of the genre in question and thus can savor the performance thanks to this connoisseurship. Under the rasa model, the audience "writes on the dancer's interpretative body of dances its own reading of those dances" (Coorlawala 2012, 49). Dancer and audience together create the dance—this leads to the underlying aspiration for universality that is inherent in the prevailing forms of Kathak. However, Chakravorty argues that because the process of developing rasa relies on the transmission of codified gestures and allusions that are culturally specific, rasic experience is not available to the culturally uninitiated (Chakravorty 2008, 106). While some artists like Akram Khan enact rasa theory through a widely accessible range of mimetic movement, vocal narration, music, and set design in contemporary work (Mitra 2015, 6-10; Pillai 2017), many Indian classical artists practice within a fixed language that relies on the assumption of the audience's certain familiarity with north Indian regional aesthetics, histories, and vocabularies.

In Chapter 3, I will explore how Kathak artists working in intercultural contexts in the diaspora have been experimenting with ways to fulfil the mandate of universality by creating rasic experiences for culturally mixed audiences. Here, I wish to emphasis Kathak's unique position in the Indian classical dance world as existing between highly codified techniques of abhinaya accessible only to sophisticated audiences, and the "muddied flux of everyday life" that inspires creative movement taken from the quotidian gestures of real life (Ram 2010, 266). Only in Kathak can the dancer easily move between an invocation of the god Shiva, replete with highly specific hand gestures corresponding to his mythical attributes that would be legible only to a culturally initiated audience, and a rhythmic sequence depicting the hustle and bustle of

contemporary field hockey players jockeying for the ball.[120] As a flexible practice, Kathak continually interrogates "what constitutes abhinaya in twenty-first-century global and intercultural performance contexts," as I will demonstrate throughout this dissertation (Mitra 2016, 92).

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In this section I have argued that the cyclical logic of taal and the universally resonant ideal of rasa together mark the fixed limits of Kathak dance, allowing dancers to exercise a high degree of flexible, personalized expression within a shared set of parameters that mark the edges of the dance. The key tenets of flexibility that I outline below stretch and contract within the structures of taal and rasa.

SECTION II: Tenets of Flexibility and Their Fixed Limits

As the foundational frameworks of Kathak, taal and rasa enable what I identify as the three inherently flexible tenets of Kathak dance: improvisation, creative interpretation, and the experience of transcendence through *riyaaz* (rigorous daily practice). I argue that these three essential, formal elements of the dance generate, cultivate, and even mandate a flexible, creative, and productive sense of self that allows the Kathak dancer to engage in both highly personalized expressions unique to their own individuality, *and* transformative embodiments that allow the dancer to exceed, overflow, or simply bypass their own quotidian identities. These three tenets

[120] I draw this example from Saswati Sen's solo performance at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London, on August 1, 2015. This kind of oscillation between everyday themes and mythological representations, for instance, is not easily accomplished in most other forms of classical dance due to their prevailing strictures and aesthetic conventions.

overlap and flow into one another; in the pages that follow, I define them separately for conceptual clarity, but it will become apparent that, in theory and in practice, these three tenets are not entirely distinct from one another. Deep and rigorous practice builds the skills for improvisation which in turn enables individualized creative interpretation, while experimentation with improvisation and creative interpretation can guide the experience and quality of one's riyaaz.

Interwoven in this description, I introduce the key repertoire items of Kathak and how they exemplify and/or depart from these tenets of flexibility. These repertoire items are the means through which the tenets of flexibility are physicalized and expressed, as well as the means through which the structures of taal and rasa are recognized, adhered to, reinterpreted, and/or deconstructed. I focus this section on Kathak's formal and philosophical flexibility, touching on how these aesthetic tenets lead to the potential for Kathak dancers to engage with flexible socio-cultural identifications.

Before embarking on an exploration of the vast realm of flexible possibilities theoretically available through the practice of Kathak, I must emphasize that the tenets of flexibility I describe are informed by the dominant *discourses* about what the main values, goals, and techniques of Kathak are, as opposed to its nuanced lived realities. The discourses around Kathak's flexibility are constructed and circulated in multiple domains, including pedagogy, performance, and representation. These discourses rely on certain idealized circumstances, which include deep, long-term training, concert-length solo performance as the primary mode of presentation, and the presence of a connoisseur audience of *rasikas*. The range of abstract and material conditions and contexts, specifically those uniquely diasporic conditions that preclude these idealized circumstances and therefore preclude the full theoretical flexibility of the dance,

are the focus of the rest of the dissertation. I draw on a mixture of previous scholarship on the form and my own research and observations as a Kathak practitioner to map the ideals of dance against its lived realities.

Improvisation

One of the many features of Kathak that distinguishes it from the other classical Indian dances is its allowance for improvisation. Echoing Bose's (1994) description of Kathak as an *anibandha* or unbound dance, Saxena describes Kathak as "artistically open" and uniquely individual (Saxena 1991, 53). He writes that in a solo performance, "the Kathak dancer is free to vary accentuation in a pattern without, of course, really straying from the *sama* [sum]; and also to presently dance what his immediate involvement suggests as against what is prescribed by a pre-fixed program" (Saxena 1991, 54). The kind of personal stylization, arrangement, and improvisation distinguishes Kathak from other Indian classical dances and enables a highly individualized kind of creative expression that gives the dance a "quality of spontaneity" (Kothari 1989, 102). From the overall arrangement of a program to the pacing of the music to the execution of minute technique, the dancer has the prerogative to improvise within the reigning structures of taal and rasa. In Kathak, the dancer dynamically responds to the music, rather than attempting to simply sync up with the music (Vatsyayan 1992, 81-85).

In the progression of a traditional solo concert presentation, the first rhythmic piece of repertoire[121] would be the *upaaj*, which is meant to be a wholly improvised presentation of footwork set to a slow melodic backdrop of the chosen taal. The dancer generally starts small, playing with short combinations of footwork that syncopate as the taal approaches sum, before

[121] I am drawing on the present-day conventions of Kathak performance in my outline of repertoire. This configuration of repertoire items has been constructed by a variety of iconic 20th century figures of Kathak (key among them Madame Menaka, Maya Rao, and Birju Maharaj) and circulated internationally through pedagogy (see Walker 2014).

introducing longer and more complex patterns of footwork—the sounds of which are enhanced by the *ghungroo*, or small bells, adorning the ankles. While the focus is primarily on footwork, small gestures of the hands and eyes may further ornament the taal. When presented in a proscenium setting, the general presentation style features the dancer far downstage, often directly in front of a foot mic. The music is minimal—only the slow drone of the lehera keeps tempo for the sound of the dancer's slapping feet and jingling bells. Because the percussion instrumentalists usually play set compositions in synchronization with the dancer, these musicians are mostly silent during improvised sequences like upaaj, which offers the space for the dancer to establish her mastery of rhythm through footwork and create a one-to-one connection with the audience, directly addressing spectators through eye contact, leading gestures, and minimalist movements that demand attention be paid to her expert manipulation of rhythm alone. According to Saxena,

> the dancer sees here not merely the order and location of the beats [of the taal], but the ample room they provide for creative work. The interval that keeps them apart not only admits of, but requires, syllabic filling if it is to seem alive and orderly on the inside. The Kathak [dancer] realizes this and meets the need in varying ways […] I spoke of intentionality as the mind's attunement with the need and promise of the moment (Saxena 1993, 53).

The upaaj is a moment early in the program for the dancer to demonstrate her deep understanding of the taal (*layakari*); but more importantly, it is a moment full of promise, a chance to showcase an expression of the taal that is unique to this dancer, establishing her rhythmic virtuosity and setting the tone for the rest of the performance.[122]

[122] The truly improvisatory nature of upaaj has today largely given way to highly-rehearsed combinations passed down from guru to shishya. For reasons related to the value for continuity and authenticity that will be explored more in the next chapter, performing one's guru's signature upaaj sequence has become more valued than experimenting with original rhythmic improvisation for many pre-professional and even professional Kathak dancers in the diaspora. Even in such a rehearsed iteration, upaaj does still act as a moment when the dancer introduces herself through movement and claims the audience's attention.

Upaaj is generally followed by *thaat,* a semi-improvised series of movements distinct from the upaaj but still set in the slow tempo. In thaat, the division and decoration of the cycle of taal is extended from only the feet (in upaaj) to the entire body. The dancer begins to awaken the rest of the body, engaging the minor limbs[123] in particular with the cadence of the taal, shifting between long periods of subtle movements focusing on the wrists, waist, neck, shoulders, and eyes, to sudden and swift transitions that end in arrested poses on sum. These transitions also syncopate the steady, circular background rhythm, with the dancer drawing attention to the half- and quarter-beats of a particular taal before ending on sum, usually with a satisfyingly dramatic flourish of the arms and wrists or a tantalizingly subtle gesture of the eyes and chin.

The last piece of rhythmic improvisation that is a reliable presence in the solo performance of Kathak is the *jugalbundi*. Also called *sawal-jawab*, or "question-answer," jugalbundi is a back-and-forth playful exchange between dancer and instrumentalist(s). The dancer will offer a short, rhythmic variations of footwork and toss it to a musician, usually the tabla artist but sometimes the string instrumentalists or even the vocalist, who then tries to replicate or one-up the initial variation. The exchange builds in speed, with the variations becoming shorter and the rate of exchange becoming faster until the artists move toward a joint finale. The competitive drama of the jugalbundi often acts as the closing item in the traditional Kathak concert. This sequence is meant to be a light-hearted display of competition between the artists on stage, but it also offers a moment for the dancer to return to the free-wheeling, casually presented rhythmic improvisation of upaaj that initiated the performance, thus reinscribing the logic of circularity undergirding Kathak form. Virtuosity in the jugalbundi is marked by the

[123] The *Natya Sastra* distinguishes between the *anga* or major limbs (the head, hands, breast, sides, waist, and feet), the *upanga* or minor limbs (eyes, eyebrows, nose, lower lip, and chin), and the *pratyanga* or adjoining limbs (shoulder blades, arms, back, belly, thighs, and calves) all of which are essential to Indian classical dance practice (Dhadheech 2016, 28).

complexity of the rhythmic variations executed neatly within the parameters of the taal, the ability of the artists to respond creatively to each other's challenges, and the excitement of competition that the artists are able to develop for the audience to partake in.

The improvisatory limits of upaaj, thaat, and jugalbundi result from the single rule of necessary adherence to taal, which allows for a breadth of experimentation[124] inside its temporal parameters, namely the completion of rhythmic patterns and movements on sum. Rhythmic variations can be made in many different formats—even divisions, uneven divisions, doubles, triples, quadruple repetitions—in the body of the taal cycle, but the pursuit of a satisfying sum is constant. The more complex the deviation away from taal, the more impressive the ultimate return to sum becomes. In this sense, improvisation in these repertoire items is highly encouraged, but clearly marking the limit of that flexible expression is also a part of successful execution. The movement principles of thaat illustrate the balance between flexible, improvised dance and its necessary fixity: in this phase of the performance, the dancer can cover space on the stage, unfolding the limbs in quick, syncopated gestures, sharp turns, mimetic vignettes, but always culminating with sudden, controlled stillness on the beat of sum. The applause often elicited from such a display of flexibility within the fixity of the taal is affirmation how virtuosity in Kathak is measured by the dancer's ability to balance between the two.

However, this understanding of Kathak's improvisational potential assumes an *ideal* solo performance. The reality of tightly choreographed solo performances that recycle identical material in the above-mentioned rhythmic sequences limits the actualization of flexible improvisation. As I've described it, improvisation remains an idealized goal proliferated in the

[124] Kathak also features rhythmic compositions that are not improvisational: *tore*, *tukre*, *paran*, and *parmelu* are all important nritta compositions that are composed, memorized, and choreographed before a performance. However, I will add that the act of composing these rhythmic patterns also allows for great flexibility and individual creativity within the structures of taal, even if the performance of these patterns is not improvised.

discourse around the dance, achievable in only the few instances where the training, skill and inventiveness of the dancer and the context of the performance[125] align in a perfect way. More common is a mixture of memorized material (often tied to a responsibility towards reproducing the aesthetic associated with a certain guru or lineage, as I will discuss more in Chapter 2 and 3) with some moments of personalized, improvised flair.

Creative Interpretation

Improvisation also features greatly in the repertoire items that represent the *nritya*, or dramatic storytelling aspect of the dance. In this expression of Kathak, virtuosity of performance is linked to the clarity and emotional power of the dancer's *abhinaya,* or use of mimetic gestures and facial expressions to share a narrative, and her ability to produce the rasic experience. Moving abhinaya often comes from powerful bhava, emotions evoked by the dancer that energize the performance of abhinaya and make it convincing to the spectator.

I offer the term "creative interpretation" to describe the degree to which the individual dancer assumes agency in the interpretation and expression of Kathak's storytelling repertoire. I argue that it is not a careful reproduction of canonical choreography that is most valued in the performance of nritya repertoire; rather, it is the level to which a dancer is able to effectively evoke an image or feeling through her unique and often improvisatory use of abhinaya that relies on her own "imaginative faculty" (Vatsyayan 1992, 88; Kothari 1989, 108). Creative interpretation in my theorization of Kathak places the dancer squarely at the nexus of flexibility and fixity, where she can exercise personal judgment, call on past experiences and memories to

[125] Indeed, a few Kathak dancers have remarked to me that when they perform for passive or "dull" audiences, their desire to improvise and engage deeply with experimentation and creativity evaporates and they revert to rote material. The context of the performance is integral to the expression of creativity and improvisation by the dancer.

inform her movement, and reinterpret communal knowledge in the depiction of characters, moods, and storylines.

To give one example: in a rendition of a romantic song about the monsoon season, Kathak maestro Birju Maharaj illustrates the line *"ghir ghir aayi badara"* about the approach of dark rainclouds with predictable and easily identifiable gestures that depict lovers leaning out their windows gazing up at the sky as sprinkles of rain begin. But in repeating the line several times, he offers many other less predictable but equally effective gestural descriptions of the same clouds, alluding to their dark and dense quality by miming the lighting of a small oil lamp which gives off short puffs of dark smoke in one instance, and by showing a woman combing her equally dark and dense hair in another instance.[126] What is virtuosic in this performance is not the rendition of the commonly shared visual motifs,[127] such as lovers at their windows[128] (however compelling those renditions are), but the uncommon and beautifully evocative additions, expansions, and complications of the theme that Maharaj has chosen to explore. In other words, what is virtuosic is his creative interpretation of the material, not the recirculation of common motifs—although crucially, the conventional tropes need to be displayed and referenced as the point of departure to engage the spectator before the dancer can showcase her individual creative elucidations. As Narayan explains, "each interpretation of the line or word could be at a different plane, namely from the mundane to the spiritual and the ethereal," traversing the realms of the representational, the metaphorical, and the poetic (Narayan 1998, 72).

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[126] "Pandit Birju Mahara: Thumri." *YouTube*, uploaded by Vishnu Tattva Das Odissi Vilas, July 26, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfA2I7Cd4nE. Accessed October 23, 2018.

[127] These motifs come from a mixture of communally familiar visual iconographies from life northern India as well as imagery from poetry, visual art, and mythology.

[128] Murty, G. R. K. "India's Romance with Monsoon Rains: A Peep into Poetic Expressions and Personal Experiences." *The IUP Journal of English Studies* 9.3 (2014): 54-73.

To unpack this idea of creative interpretation—the balance between individualized (re)interpretation of dramatic elements and fixed precedents in the performance of nritya—it is necessary to recognize the state of multiplicity mandated by nritya repertoire in solo performance. In the act of storytelling, the solo Kathak dancer can portray many different characters: men, women, children, gods, goddesses, demons, animals, even non-sentient characters such as trees or the wind.[129] The foundations of bhava and rasa, together with the tool of abhinaya, create a level ground for all dancers regardless of gender, age, or appearance, to effectively "portray all the characters within the selected episode, enacting one, impersonating another, effortlessly switching[130] gender portrayal as the roles appear in the narrative without any extraneous use of costumes, makeup, props of technical effects."[131] In Kathak, the switch between characters is made generally through quick turns known as *palte*, or sometimes through a simple change in body posture, occupation of a level, or directional orientation. For example, a male dancer may show a disciplinary exchange between an angry Ma Yashoda and her naughty child Krishna by switching characterizations between a seated, wide-eyed Krishna and the standing, formidable Yashoda. The dancer will not dress in attire signaling his status as a female or youthful character, or disavow his masculine form in such performance of cherubic child and long-suffering mother; rather, he "plays a series of roles or impersonates the female with the audience's absolute awareness and full view of his natural male appearance" (Shah 1998, 3). Thus, even the most ornamented female performer can, in theory, easily portray the furious, animal skin-clad Lord Shiva, or a male demon, or the bi-gendered Ardhanarishwara through the

[129] This solo rendition of multiple characters conforms to the "*ekaharya lasya*" convention described in *Natya Sastra* in which one actor plays many roles (Vatsyayan 1992, 9).
[130] Characterization is different in dance dramas, which became an occasional feature in Kathak practice at large dance institutions in the late 20st century. In dance dramas, dancers only portray their assigned character rather than multiple characters.
[131] Shah, Purnima. "Transcending gender in the performance of Kathak." *Dance Research Journal* 30.2 (1998): 2-17. Pg. 3.

power of evocation. Indeed, "what impresses the spectator and what is retained primarily in the connoisseur audience's memory is not so much the physical image or personality of the dancer but rather the artistically created images and personalities of the characters" (Shah 1998, 8).

It is important to mark that such portrayals should not be crude imitations or exaggerations. The dancer is expected to have "a profound understanding of the characters he portrays, not only at an intellectual level in terms of their psycho-sociology, but also in his trained awareness of the appropriate usage of his creative energy in manifesting them" (Shah 1998, 6). Saxena holds that "abhinaya is not the direct upsurge […] of a present emotion […] the Kathak's aim here is, of course, not the mere projection of (a semblance of) emotion; he has to make us visualize the *situation* that relates to particular emotions" (Saxena 1993, 129, emphasis in original). This visualization through abhinaya can take the form of speech (*vachika*), dress (*aharya*), body (*angika*), and states of mind (*sattvika*). Costuming and verbal expressions are used minimally in Kathak storytelling—dancers do not change costumes to depict different characters, and they only speak intermittently when reciting compositions or translating/introducing stories at the microphone. Instead, the vocalist's lyrics usually supply the vachika element. Dance performance, therefore, relies mostly on angika abhinaya, which itself is encoded in the abstract, symbolic systems of gesture and expression rooted in the *Natya Sastra* that could be difficult for some audience members to interpret correctly if they are not familiar with the dance tradition.

For example, one must be able to decipher that an open palm with the tip of the ring finger touching the thumb symbolizes a peacock feather (this hand gestures is known as *mayura,* which literally means "peacock"). However, based on the philosophy of rasa as universally accessible emotional feeling, I argue that truly virtuosic abhinaya in Kathak should exceed the

limits of technical vocabulary and background in instilling rasa in the audience.[132] As I described in the introduction, Kathak is uniquely suited to go beyond the limiting technicalities of precise, symbolic articulations of hand and face. Unlike the other classical dances, Kathak engages with the most flexible interpretation of abhinaya techniques, mixing the esoteric vocabularies rooted in the *Natya Sastra* with more familiar gestures and movements from daily life. For example, many Kathak dancers do not in fact use the particular *mayura* hand gesture to show a peacock feather, instead using a more relaxed version of *arala*, in which the tip of the thumb touches the middle of the bent index finger as the rest of the fingers gently flare out. The arala gesture has no codified relation to the peacock feather the way the mayura gesture does, but more importantly it simply looks like a peacock feather. Coupled with the rest of the dancer's motions (the strutting, slightly hopping gait, the sharp motions of the neck, the curious eyes, the fluttering of the hands), the gesture becomes more easily decipherable as a peacock feather than the more complicated mayura gesture. I argue that it is this flexible relationship with technical vocabularies that separates Kathak from the other classical dances and enables the Kathak dancer to realize the full potential of her imaginative faculties as she strives to evoke rasa in all audiences.

Creative interpretation in Kathak not only allows but in fact demands that the dancer exceed the identity categories that may govern her interactions in the everyday social sphere. Such a transcendence of the social stratifications of quotidian life—such as distinctions between male and female, caste group, class, and racial or regional group—is necessary in achieving aesthetic virtuosity. By sidelining or exceeding her daily identity attachments, the dancer is able to prepare herself as an empty body, capable of inhabiting any role, technique, or

[132] I will revisit this idea in my exploration of intercultural dance productions organized by Akādemi in London.

characterization demanded by the dance.[133] Rather than embodying single characters as in, for example, ballet productions, the Kathak soloist "symbolizes every woman/man whose body is seen as the microcosm of the universe" (Chakravorty 2008, 112). Influenced by Hindu theology, a dominant discourse of Kathak's multiple embodiments suggests that "in her/him [the dancer] finds the 'cosmic' embrace' of Radha and Krishna, which is experienced through the intense aesthetic emotion of rasa—in a state of spiritual realization which is a form of yogic transcendence (or the merging of *atman* [the human soul] with Brahman [the universal])" (Chakravorty 2008, 112). Virtuosic abhinaya in Kathak builds on the theory that within each dancer, regardless of their actual social identity, there reside elements of both the male and the female, the mortal and the divine, the human and the animal, of an essential multiplicity that can also be read as an essential oneness with other beings. Being in touch with this sense of multiplicity is crucial to effective abhinaya and thus effective storytelling. I suggest that the rigor of training in Kathak dance, which imparts techniques and philosophies behind male and female physicalities, is the key factor in enabling flexibility through creative interpretation. Intensive Kathak training, which may take place over decades and is never considered truly complete, surpasses the mandate to memorize choreographies and condition the body to mimic certain shapes and rhythms. Rather, it involves a recognition of the capacity of a single human to artistically conjure a multiplicity of beings—range of characters and conditions—and display a command over embodying different configurations with purpose and ease. This can only be born out of a one's bodily skills and the potential for one's bodily expression, producing an

[133] Zarrilli, Phillipp. "What does it mean 'to become the character?'" in *By Means of Performance*, edited by Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, Cambridge University Press: 1990. Pgs. 131 – 148.
Schechner, Richard. *Between Theater and Anthropology.* University of Pennsylvania Press: 2010.

accumulated expertise that is arrived at slowly through training and practice, as I will describe in an upcoming section on riyaaz.

However, the potential for creative interpretation as I've described it is also complicated by that very same training in the way it may reinstate dominant, stereotypical, fixed notions of identity. Dancers are implicated in recirculating these fixed identities even as they temporarily circumvent them in their practice of dance.[134] For example, male dancers may be freed of their normative male identities when they enact female characters, but they do so by reinscribing certain movements, behaviors, gestures, and expressions that are codified as normatively "female."[135] To dig further into this example, it would be helpful to consider the categories of *tandav,* which commonly refers to a masculine style of movement, and *lasya,* which commonly refers to a feminine style of movement. Though now generally demarcated as male and female dance styles, tandav and lasya originally indicated ways of executing a movement across a spectrum that had vigorous or energetic quality of movement (tandav) on one end, and soft, graceful qualities of movement (lasya) on the other end.[136] Krishna is associated with lasya movement even as a male figure, while Kali is linked to tandav movement as a female icon, but they are commonly positioned as exceptions to the tandav/male, lasya/female rule, rather than an illustration of how masculinity and femininity (as well as transgender positions) can include both tandav and lasya ways of moving. Under conditions of fixity that draw lines around what it means to be masculine and what it means to feminine, Kathak's potential to explore the breadth

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[134] I wish to emphasize that not all Kathak dancers who have been trained for a particular number of years under a certain syllabus will achieve transcendent physical expression. Assuming that rigorous training is accessible to begin with, the dancer must contend with the extremely ingrained notions of comportment, motility and spatiality that is dictated by social norms.

[135] Judith Butler makes a similar argument in her essay "Gender is Burning," which considers how in gender-bending drag performances "there is defiance and affirmation […] there is also a kind of reiteration of norms which cannot be called subversive" (Butler, 1993).

[136] Vatsyayan, Kapila. *Bharata The Natya Sastra*. Sahitya Akādemi, 1996.
Dadheech, Puru. *Kathak Dance Syllabi*. Bindu Prakashan, 2016.

of male and female corporeality in this example is curtailed. Thus, the tension between the dancer's own creative principles, the fixed interpretations of identity, and the codes of rasa and abhinaya which any creative interpretation stands on is essentially a tension between flexibility and fixity.

Dancers have agency in navigating this tension through their practice. Shruti Ghosh writes, "since the efficacy of the disciplining rests on the continuous adherence to the rule, an instance of in-adherence can thus disturb the system. Since a dancer can enter and exit from a role, h/she can make and un-make the role in his/her respective way. This is where the question of interpretation and innovation becomes important."[137] In outlining a few key items in Kathak's dramatic repertoire, I will show how the form has immense potential for both adherence and in-adherence to the rules of identity expression. The negotiation between adherence and in-adherence takes place through the dancer's creative interpretation.

A primary piece of a Kathak dancer's nritya or expressive repertoire is the *gatbhav*, or the performance of narrative stories to minimal musical accompaniment in the form of instrumentation only. Gatbhav does not include any vocal element—rather, stories are told from beginning to end only through the dancer's movement, mimetic gestures and facial expressions (abhinaya) set against the subtle marking of the taal on the lehera. The *gat* (gait) part of the gatbhav is represented through understated foot movements that "arrive at sama quite gently, so they do not seem to coerce attention, though it is both needed and satisfied" (Saxena 1993, 106). While adhering to the cycle of taal, the solo dancer assumes the role of many characters to visually portray a story generally from Hindu mythology, but also from popular legend, romantic poetry, or other non-conventional sources such as non-Indian cultural knowledge and

[137] Ghosh, Shruti. "Practice performance and the performer: analysing the role of 'Preparation' in Kathak Dance." *Rupkathak Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 5.3 (2013): 167-176. Pg. 170.

contemporary life experiences. The flexibility of the gatbhav category allows for any story of the dancer's choosing to be portrayed through her own creative interpretation of the narrative through movement.

For example, at a 2013 solo debut performance of Anne Fay, a Christian student of guru Prachi Dixit in Orange County, California,[138] the dancer chose to perform a gatbhav depicting the life and death of Jesus Christ—a subject that is not conventionally addressed in the Kathak repertoire, which privileges Hindu and Muslim religiosities. Drawing from Christ's recognizable visual iconography, Fay created a unique body posture and *hasta* (hand gesture) to demarcate the character of Jesus: standing upright with one foot slightly ahead of the other as if mid-step, one hand gesturing towards his heart (perhaps gesturing towards the Sacred Heart or the Holy Ghost), and the other raised up with two fingers extended in a sign of benediction. The dancer also pulled from more commonly recognizable Kathak gestural vocabulary throughout the performance. She used the gestures of *gungat*—generally used in Indian contexts to depict women holding their veils—to depict the female characters of the story set in the Middle East, as one way of connecting the singularity of her gatbhav to more identifiable visual cues within Kathak semiotics. Her performance showcased both the flexibility of the dance form as exemplified through her unique creative interpretation of an unconventional story, and the fixed edges of that flexibility through her return to familiar gestures that tied the story of Jesus to Indian cultural motifs.

In introducing the character of Jesus Christ, the dancer employed another piece of nritya repertoire: the *gat nikaas* or *gat ki chaal,* roughly translated to "stepping out" (Saxena 1993, 104). In the gat ki chaal, dancers execute a series of half-turns called *palte* before assuming a

[138] *Samarpan*. Performance by Anne Fay, May 18, 2013, James Armstrong Theater, Torrance.

new posture and beginning a rhythmic walk in that posture. Gat ki chaal can be abstract, merely displaying variations of *ang* or bodily comportment, or it can be used to depict the ang or shape of a particular character or type of character. Common chaals or walks include Krishna holding his flute, peacocks walking in the rain, Radha or another anonymous woman opening and closing her veil, a person bringing water from the river, etc. These chaals can act as mini-vignettes that do not engage deeply with character development or rasa-creation the way other nritya forms do, emphasizing the rhythmic variations of the walk instead. In the example of the dancer portraying Jesus, she performed an original chaal of Christ before engaging in her full gatbhav story as a way of familiarizing the audience with the comportment, personality, and gestural codes she created for the character. In the chaal, the dancer performed the basic footwork of Kathak while in the character of Christ, walking lightly (as if on water, perhaps) in the conventional diagonal pattern across the stage from upstage to downstage. She used the fixed form of the chaal to express her own creative interpretation of this character, to alert the audience to that interpretation, and to marry that interpretation with structure of the taal through the addition of footwork.

Lastly, Kathak repertoire includes a series of items based on musical styles centered on existing vocal repertoire from Hindustani classical music. These include the invocational *vandhanas* and *bhajans*, regional light-classical songs such as *kajri* and *dadra*, the plaintive *ghazal* which comes from Islamic aesthetic tradition, and the ubiquitous *thumri.* I will focus here on the thumri as an example of how dancers can employ creative interpretation in the presentation of songs, as the principles apply across all performance of Kathak on these musical styles. Thumris are romantic songs that linger on the spectrum of emotions experienced by those

in love, rendered in so-called "light" taals and *raagas,* or melodic structures.[139] Thumris are sensuous—the evocative lyrics, subtle music, suggestive vocal tone, and delicate movements all combine to illustrate a range of nuanced emotions. Narayan offers a suitably sensuous description of the thumri that exemplifies the form's emphasis on redolent nature motifs in connection to feelings of love, separation, and desire:

> (thumri) embodies within itself the feelings and tender emotions experienced by men and women. In the Indus-Gangetic belt, it was a usual feature for the man to go away on work from his native place leaving behind his young wife in full bloom. Many songs have been written on the onset of spring, with tender young buds, rows and rows of mustard in the fields, the fresh nip in the air awakening similar languorous emotions within the young wife waiting for fulfillment with the return of her husband […] many songs have been written about the onset of the monsoon, the rolling thunder, the pitter-patter of rainfall, the fresh smell of the earth, the dance of the peacocks and the young beloved sending messages to her husband via the dark clouds to return home" (Narayan 1998, 101).

As Narayan began to reveal, there is a plethora of culturally-specific, sensorial, and heteronormative images that the Kathak dancer weaves in and out of in her illustration of a thumri's lyrics. Lines can be sung many times over, allowing the dancer to interpret and reinterpret each line with increasing emotional complexity and gestural creativity: for example, "a simple word like *path* can be interpreted in the appropriate context as the milky way, or as the auspicious parting of a woman's hair, or the path of the collyrium of her eyes," (Vatsyayan 1992, 88). According to Narayan, the dancer "travels the entire gamut of 'alidha' (referential), 'lakshana' (metaphorical) and 'vyanjana' (poetic)" in her interpretations (Narayan 1998, 72).

Once again, the dancer is in the position to negotiate between applying her own inventive capacity in illustrating the lines of the thumri, and the culturally-specific, expected, or simply normative interpretations of those same lines that would 1) resonate with audience enough to

[139] So-called "light" taals include the six-beat *dadra* and the eight-beat *khereva*, cycles which are lilting and lyrical in this syllabic pattern. Common light ragas used in Kathak include Khamaj, Jogiya, Bhairavi, and Pahadi that are meant to invoke romantic or happy moods.

enable a rasic communion and 2) remain appropriately faithful to accepted and precedented variations on these themes. However, I would contend that even when the dancer is faced with the limits of fixed expectations around the illustration of character and emotion, the act of navigating those expectations is an act of flexibility and creative interpretation drawing on one's imaginative faculties.

Riyaaz

Through the act of creative interpretation and the performance of multiplicity it enables, Kathak dancers are able to exceed or circumvent the daily realities of their lived identities. They do this by engaging with Kathak's flexibility of expression, acting within a space for the construction of alternative identities that nritya repertoire items provide. In the performance of nritta, or non-narrative technique, Kathak dancers are similarly able to engage with a range of rhythmic possibility and nuance per their own tastes and personalities. However, both the expression of identity in nritya performance and the expression of rhythmic artistry in nritta performance have limits. These limits are dictated at the most basic level by the foundations of taal and rasa: dancers must adhere to the cycles of taal, and they are mandated to create and sustain rasa.

I suggest that the potential and the limits of flexibility become part of the Kathak dancer's corporeality through rigorous daily practice. In this section, I will explore how such practice—called *riyaaz* or *sadhana*, in Muslim and Hindu contexts respectively[140]—enables the

[140] In this dissertation I will use the more commonly cited term *riyaaz.*

experience of transcending quotidian social identifications through a practice of discipline. I will show how riyaaz is comprised of both the minute workings of fixity and the vastness of flexibility.

In addition to lessons with a teacher and rehearsals for performance, Kathak dancers are expected to engage in their own riyaaz, which consists of the repetitive exercise of different elements of repertoire and technique. A day's riyaaz may include running through a group of repertoire items multiple times, working through a particularly complex movement phrase, or repeating one element of technique over and over again to perfection. When done in the presence of musicians, the dancer's riyaaz would also consist of the constant drone of the lehera and the relentless thrumming of the tabla marking the taal. In other words, "through rhythm and repetition, the performer enters the eternal circular space […] which is symbolically marked by the cyclical time of melodic circles," (Chakravorty 2008, 111). Riyaaz is immersive—the dancer sinks into the dance and music on a sensorial level, blocking out other inputs to commit totally to the dance. Similar to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's description of states of "flow," in ideal riyaaz self-consciousness disappears,[141] time and space cease to matter, and the act of dancing becomes automatic through the "merging of action and awareness" (Csikszentmihalyi 2014, 114). These conditions facilitate a flexible conception of self because they allow the dancer to forget his or her own identity "which may result in a transcendence of ego boundaries and consequent psychic integration with metapersonal systems" (Csikszentmihalyi 2014, 135).[142] Under this theoretical ideal, there can be a deep satisfaction and sense of pleasure inherent in riyaaz, in which the

[141] Mitra disagrees with this framing of dance as liberating, suggesting instead that in the immersive experience of practicing Indian classical dance, "the dancer's body becomes the only tool of expression and appears to lose its capacity to think. It simply moves, and in a Cartesian manner appears to embody an isolated existence removed from the brain," (Mitra 2005, 171).

[142] This description matches what a few dancers I interviewed to referred to as a state of oneness, a state of "just being," and a state of being "close to God."

dancer becomes both performer and audience member, "as she is moved by her own experience of dancing" (Ghosh 2013, 171). Stamina, strength, control, and mastery of technique are built up through riyaaz.

According to Vatsyayan, virtuosic Kathak "points to the fact that the body can and does move from the physical to the metaphysical, and from the grossest to the subtlest, from time actual to time transcendental."[143] Chakravorty adds that this is done through a honing of the body that produces the "siddha-deha," which means not only the perfected body but the perfected spiritual body in certain Hindu knowledge systems.[144] I build on Chakravorty's insights to suggest that in dance, the perfected body is exemplified in a dancer who is able to transcend or at least negotiate the fixities of her lived reality through skilled improvisation and creative interpretation. The perfection of these skills happens through riyaaz. Thus, riyaaz enables the high-level execution of improvisation and creative interpretation through which the dancer experiences and enacts flexibility. As one student told Chakravorty, "for a mature dancer, it is when after years of imitating her guru she can engage in her own interpretation of a particular *bol* or a song that she is complete as a dancer. Riyaaz allows a dancer to reach this creative process, and so creativity is not separate but integral to the larger meaning of riyaaz," (Chakravorty 2008, 109).

However, the riyaaz through which the dancer gathers the tools to reach the perfected and flexible body is double-edged. It enables flexible expressions of identity in the act of dancing even as it reinscribes fixity through the codification of technique. "In each riyaaz session (the dancer) perfects her gestures, movements and expressions to make possible a faithful depiction

[143] Kapila Vatsyayan, 'Two Keynote Addresses." *Dance Research Annual*, Vol. 14, 1983), p. 3.
[144] Urban, Hugh. "Secret Bodies:Re-Imagining the Body in the Vaisnava-Sahajiya Tradition of Bengal." *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 28, no. 1/2, 1993, pp. 45–62.

of the characters; each riyaaz in turn inscribes the dancer's body with certain social values" (Ghosh 2013, 169). According to Chakravorty, riyaaz is a ritual through which "the cultural initiation to Kathak is completed and gendered subjects are produced," among other social identifications (Chakravorty 2008, 106).

Riyaaz is ultimately a form of discipline: it is the mode through which the fixed limits of Kathak dance are normalized and maintained through the work of the body. Drawing from Michel Foucault's work on discipline and docility,[145] Ghosh describes riyaaz as a kind of

> training [that] evidences the disciplinary aspect of dance which calls for a willing submission on the part of the dancers to the system which subsequently produces useful bodies, i.e. dancing bodies equipped with certain skills […] The harnessing impulse of the training which is geared towards producing certain capacities within the dancer is premised upon an impulse to regulate as well […] Thus riyaaz as a part of taalim (training) regulates bodies, reproduces bodies and redefine bodies (Ghosh 168).[146]

Chakravorty points out how engaging in the emotional and sensorial experience of abhinaya love-play between Radha and Krishna through riyaaz, for example, can have the effect of deepening one understanding of Kathak at the cost of other aspects of the dance: "riyaaz can be a powerful site where the dominant narrative of Krishnalila is reinforced in the minds of its practitioners as the authentic tradition of Kathak, thereby homogenizing its diverse history and tradition, especially its development in Muslim courts as a secular dance form" (Chakravorty 2008, 112). As an exercise of power that is both productive and regulatory,[147] riyaaz can both enable the exploration of flexible modes of interpretation *and* fix the dance to prescribed precedents and notions of authenticity.

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[145] Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.
[146] I will visit the taalim or training of Kathak in the context of *guru-shishya parampara* (teacher-student tradition) in Chapter 2.
[147] Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*. 1976. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Even as riyaaz acts to discipline bodies, the level of immersion and focus implicit in the practice of riyaaz creates a path for ritual transcendence. Schechner frames the dancer as both "self-who-is-observing" and "self-who-is-performing"; these two selves engage deeply with one another during riyaaz, which "opens a liminal space to allow further play—improvisation, variation, and self-enjoyment" (Schechner 2001, 46). The intensity of repetition and focus enables a degree of abandonment, as Ghosh suggests:

> The dancer experiences trance. H/she is enraptured by the sheer presence of his/her self […] Whether practicing with a group or in one's own company, the trance helps the dancer obtain an acute awareness about his/her body. This perception, I suggest, problematizes the aspect of self-submission, so strongly advocated by the disciplinary and ritualistic aspect of training. I argue that the consciousness of one's own body and the pleasure a dancer derives also propels self-assertion which further points that submission and self-assertion are not to be taken as opposites. They co-exist, they interact, and thus they shape each other continuously (2013, 169).

In other words, the degree of flexible expression and sense of agency enabled by riyaaz co-exists with the minute details and restrictions of practicing technique.

To conclude, the practice of riyaaz takes the form of an extreme physical discipline, but it also enables a sense of freedom and flexibility through sensorial immersion, self-submission, and self-assertion. I differentiate riyaaz from training, which I will describe in the next chapter as part of Kathak pedagogy that is subject to far more conditions of fixity that limit flexible expression and experience. As an almost ritual act, riyaaz, I argue, allows for "bodily transformations (that) serve to signify a deconstruction of the social conventions and assumptions," whereas training and pedagogy are systems that affirm and circulate conventions and assumptions.[148] Of course, the link between training and riyaaz is indisputable—a dancer can only engage deeply in the practice of something they have been taught, and the values,

[148] Pechilis, Karen. "Introduction: Bodily Transformations Across Indian Religions." *International Journal of Hindu Studies*. 10:2 (2006):167-170.

expectations, and responsibilities embedded in that training ground the nature of the dancer's riyaaz.

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In this section, I have highlighted the core threads of what I argue is an in-built capacity and mandate for a fluid, creative, and individualized practice of Kathak dance. The remaining portions of this dissertation will reframe these ideal threads of flexible practice in the context of Kathak's changing socio-political history and the conditions of diaspora that prevail upon Kathak's flexible potential and transform the very premise of Kathak dance.

SECTION III: Classicization, Standardization, and Contextual Fixity

Kathak's flexibility as I've described it is a value embedded in the aesthetic, philosophical, and repertory frameworks of the dance. Under ideal circumstances, flexibility manifests in the practice of improvisation, creative interpretation, and riyaaz.

I now introduce the concept of contextual fixity to describe the pervasive conditions that prevent or limit Kathak's flexibility by prescribing how the dance is taught, learned, performed, and discursively framed. I argue that Kathak dancers in the Indian diaspora are subject to contextual fixities defined by sets of abstract and material limitations, expectations, and assumptions that curtail the effect of Kathak's flexibility on processes of expression and identification. While a myriad of conditions contributes to the contextual fixity that shapes the

lived reality of diasporic Kathak dance, for the purposes of this close study of Kathak and identity, I focus on three key factors of fixity:

1) the discursive and governmental categorization of Kathak in India as a classical dance that represents a nationalist framing of Indian history and culture, and which I argue influences the dominant values shaping Kathak in diasporic settings;

2) systems of pedagogy and conventions of performance that value lineage,[149] continuity, and "Indian-ness"[150] over freedom of expression and flexible identification, and

3) cultural and racial identity politics that impact the visibility and financial/social infrastructures available to Kathak artists.

These three factors are massive forces that shift and morph in the ways they impact Kathak dancers in different contexts. I argue that because of these three forces of contextual fixity, Kathak often becomes a tool to enact static, hegemonic categories of cultural identity. Still, I contend that the flexibility inherent in Kathak dance continues to contest contextual fixity and complicate monolithic interpretations of Indian diasporic identity; this negotiation between flexibility and fixity in the context of diasporic Kathak practice will be further explored through case studies in the following two chapters. In terms of the formal qualities of the dance, I also point to how these contextual fixities can be creative, rather than simply prohibitive. They produce new and responsive iterations of the dance even as they foreclose other paths toward flexibility.

[149] I use "lineage" instead of "gharana" to differentiate between lines of inheritance and transmission between generations (lineage) and collections of stylistic techniques and values the grew from but are not limited to particular genealogies of dancers (gharana).
[150] As will be discussed more in the next chapter, this notion of "Indian" in the context of my study on Kathak includes assumptions of north Indian, Hindi-speaking regional identity, and Hinduism.

In the next chapter, I will explore the second and third factors relating to pedagogy and cultural identity politics. I will use case study examples from my two field sites of London and Los Angeles to demonstrate how cultural politics in the U.K. and the U.S. around national belonging and cultural authenticity affect the practice and stakes of Kathak dance, and how dancers and teachers respond to these stakes through pedagogy and performance. In the remaining portion of this chapter, I focus on the first point about how Kathak's classicization in the mid-20th century loaded the form with a constructed history tied to nationalist values that limit the dance's flexible potential in the present day. I then transition into a discussion of how values for a consolidated Kathak practice circulate in diasporic contexts, looking in particular at the fixing of Kathak dance through standardized systems of pedagogy.

Classicization: Fixing Kathak as an Icon of Indian Nationalism

"The awakening of the national spirit in the wave of our fight for freedom from alien rule and similar awakening among intellectuals contributed to salvaging our precious heritage of classical dancers."
—Sunil Kothari*, Kathak: Indian Classical Dance Art,* 1989

As described in the Introduction, dance, music, and dramatic practice in India coalesced over many centuries and through many contextual twists and turns to form what is recognizable today as Kathak, a classical dance of the concert stage. However, what I frame as simply the latest iteration of a historically flexible dance is embedded in a pervasive discourse of indigeneity and nationalism that fixes Kathak as an elite icon of unchanged Indian aesthetic, cultural, and moral identity. This is the discourse of classicization, a formal and informal process through which Kathak was taken from the hands of tawaifs and courtesans, dusted off by high-status (male) artists, high-caste intellectuals, and influential political leaders, and given a new

history that places the dance firmly in a family of ancient performance practices rooted in the *Natya Sastra* and loaded with the symbolism of unified Indian nationhood.

In the existing scholarly literature about Kathak dance, there are two major schools of thought. One school of thought affirms Kathak's classicization as the appropriate rescue and recognition of an ancient art form by "the enlightened section of the society" that was forced into secularism and moral bankruptcy by Muslim rulers and British patrons (Kothari 1989, 15; see also Vyas 1963, Dhadhich 1981, Massey 1999, Khokar 1984, Narayan 1998, Natavar 2000). This is the narrative that reigns supreme in Kathak dance classes and performances all over the world, and distinguishes nautch dancers from "genuine Kathaks" (Narayan 1998, 23). Another, more recent, school of thought points out how the independence movement in India brought about a respectability politics that spurred the cultural and political elite to strategically align dance and music with a nationalist project rooted in ancient heritage as part of a larger strategy to affirm India's right and capacity to govern itself (see Chakravorty 2008, Walker 2014, Meduri 2008, Bakhle 2005, Mitra 2006, O'Shea 2007). Additionally, Alessandra Lopez y Royo has pointed out how the application of the "classical" label to these dances, which until Indian independence had been "classified using indigenous systems as descriptors," reflects a Euro-American framing of these dances has having "eternal values of universal validity."[151] This strategy of creating and promoting a respectable, ancient, unified Indian identity through "classical" arts was a direct response to British claims that Indian culture needed to be lifted out of degradation by foreign rule (Chakravorty 2008, 47). Tapati Guha-Thakurta offers a succinct description of this pan-Indian effort in her account of the Bengali Renaissance:

> The yawning gap between the past and the present was sought to be bridged by the indigenous initiative in 'superior' forms of art practice, and in the production of new

[151] Lopez y Royo, Alessandra. "Dance in the British South Asian diaspora: redefining classicism." *Postcolonial Text [Online]* 1.1 (2004): 1-14.

> 'authentic' forms of knowledge on Indian art. The past, as a symbol of the nation's autonomous history and civilizational lineage, had to prepare the way for a present in which tradition and modernized knowledge would together frame a new national self.[152]

In this section, I draw on the analysis of the "classical" label in Indian music and dance by scholars in the second school of thought to demonstrate how classicization fixes the history, function, and identity of Kathak, and in doing so obscures the flexible essence of the dance. The classicization process as a conscious search for origins ultimately rewrote a discursive history of the dance that promotes its fixed position as an icon of Hindu nationalism.

Following the momentum of the Anti-Nautch movement, the mass-publication of the Sanskrit performance manual the *Natya Sastra* in the 1890s offered a standard by which the performance traditions of India could be identified as ancient and Brahmanic (Chakravorty 2008, 47). The "indigenous Indian historiographic project" of this time period was a direct response to the colonial accounts of Indian history as "a steady decline into degradation and despotism, without any of the Orientalist beliefs in the important accomplishments of ancient India" (Walker 2014, 14). The *Natya Sastra* and other Sanskrit texts of that era were framed as proof of India's great artistic heritage that predated colonialism; this allowed the cultural and political elite of the later Independence era to create conscious gaps in Kathak's history that invisibilized the contributions of *tawaifs,* nautch dancers, and Muslim patrons in the name of unifying and aggrandizing India's cultural identity through an implicitly Hindu ethos. Further, as Mitra points out, the cultural codes that emerged from this classicization process "do not allow for the pure and the profane to exist in the same female body," leading to the erasure of the complex identities of the dancing women of Kathak's history."[153] The discussions that occurred among

[152] Guha-Thakura, Tapati. "Recovering the Nation's Art." *Texts of Power: Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal*, edited by Partha Chatterjee, University of Minnesota Press, 1995, 63-92. Pg. 63.
[153] Mitra, Royona. "Cerebrality: rewriting corporeality of a transcultural dancer." *Tanz im Kopf* 15 (2005): 167-183.

government officials and cultural leaders at the first All India Dance Seminar in 1958 also reveal a conscious effort to create a "pristine" image of the dance that recovers its reputation from the courts of Muslim rulers and the *kotas* or establishments of tawaifs and nautch dancers.[154] One presenter went so far as to suggest changing the name of Kathak dance to "Bharat Nritya"[155] as a way to distinguish the newly respectable, classicized, Vaishnavite dance form from its destitute past, now that "educated girls and boys are taking to the classical heritage."[156] A.C. Pandeya argued that centuries of Muslim rule forced what was an originally Hindu devotional dance out of traditionality and into "general decadence":

> During the period of general decadence, in the social-cum-political life of North India, Natwari[157] dance gradually lost contact with devotional themes. Before the Muslim rulers, the story of Radha and Krishna could not be enacted. Emphasis was laid on footwork […] Radha was portrayed with Muslim influence. Innovations in bhava exposition were made in terms of *ada*, grace. Urdu works of this period and later give manifold variations which may have been try to that age, not before or after it. They were based upon the 'royal community' concept and therefore cannot be taken as classical (2013, 145).

By presenting a hard line of what is and isn't classical (Hindu devotional practice drawn from the *Natya Sastra* is classical, while abstract, rhythmic, and entertaining dance that emerged in the Muslim courts is not classical), Pandeya summarizes the transparent effort to fix Kathak to a history that erases the contributions of non-Hindu performers, patrons, and influences on the form.

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[154] *Papers from the first dance seminar, 1958*, special issue of *Sangeet Natak*, edited by Sunil Kothari, 47(1-4), 2013. Pg. 6.
[155] According to A.C. Pandeya, the name "Bharata Nritya" referenced the Bharata (actor) caste who performed dance (nritya) in honor of Krishna and Vishnu in pre-Islamic north India (Pandeya, 146). But the name could also mirror Bharatanatyam, which renamed the south Indian regional form *sadir* in reference to Bharata, the presumed author of the *Natya Sastra*.
[156] Pandeya, A.C. "Bharat Nritya: Natwari." *Papers from the first dance seminar, 1958*, special issue of *Sangeet Natak*, edited by Sunil Kothari, 47(1-4), 2013, pp. 141-157.
[157] *Natwari* refers to dances devoted to and depicting *Natwar*, another name for Krishna.

It is important to note that while the idea of the *Natya Sastra* as the Sanskritic root of Kathak dance is "common knowledge" among many Kathak dancers and teachers today, the connection between the treatise and the actual reality of present-day Kathak is not entirely literal. While dramatic principles, character types, and movements of the minor and major limbs outlined in the *Natya Sastra* are all present in Kathak (and some of this alignment may have been manufactured in the modern period with the dance's codification), dancers are rarely adhering to the actual *Natya Sastra* text in contemporary practice. Vatsyayan goes so far as to call the classical dances of today "neo-classical" in an attempt to distinguish between dance as described in the *Natya Sastra* and the "contemporary Indian dance with classical inspirations" that we see (Vatsyayan 1992, 7). Describing the 20th-century interest in classical Indian dance and the *Natya Sastra* "as a sign of national pride in the glories of indigenous art and culture," she writes:

> The classical dance style of contemporary India are largely reconstructions of these fragments of antiquity. On one level, they have great antiquity which links them with the past, on another they are contemporary and recent, performed outside the traditional milieu and context, each time recreating the past, but are not the past. Sometimes the content is old, but the form and technique are new; at others, new content is infused into an older format. It is a subtle eclectic approach seemingly ancient but in fact and expression of modern sensibility (1992, 7).

Even in this flexible image of Indian classical dance as balancing elements of the ancient with modern realities, Sanskritic sources like the *Natya Sastra* bear considerable weight in the discourse of Kathak, and it is this discursive connection that I argue is most influential in the fixing of Kathak dance as an icon of a glorious indigenous past.

The connection between Kathak and Sanskritic culture was championed by Madame Menaka, a pivotal character in Kathak dance history. Born Leila Sokhey to a British mother and an upper-class Indian father, Madame Menaka emerged in the 1920s and 1930s as one of the first non-hereditary women from a "respectable" background who was socially well-positioned

enough to pick up Kathak from the hands of nautch dancers and reformulate it into a concert dance. Trained under a handful of male hereditary practitioners from the Lucknow gharana, Madame Menaka produced solo and group works all based in Sanskrit dramatic texts and mythologies, which distanced her Kathak from the practice of tawaif and nautch dancers. She relished the flexibility of Kathak dance; her student Damayanti Joshi writes that though Menaka trained in several Indian dance forms, she ultimately pursued Kathak because "it was less codified than the other classical dance forms and [offered] freedom of expression and improvisation" (Chakravorty 2008, 50, citing Joshi 1989). She exercised the flexibility of Kathak by retaining certain techniques and repertoire from the nautch community, while completely eradicating or reformulating others.[158] According to Suman Bhagchandani,[159]

> Menaka's performances were a deliberate effort at erasing the traces of Mughal associations in Kathak, thereby replacing the narratives and style of performance by religious Hindu accounts. Ancient Hindu texts were carefully selected to provide the script for dance dramas and a spiritual element in dance was performed on stage in order to engage the audience in a divine experience (2018, 46).[160]

Menaka made significant strides in the development of present-day classical Kathak by drawing "inspiration from the Sanskrit dance-dramas and aesthetics based on the *Natya Sastra* and *Abhinaya Darpan,*[161] which she presented with the modern accoutrements of Western concert dance such as stage lighting, costumes, orchestral music and choreography" (Chakravorty 2008,

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[158] She favored the rhythmic structure of the tabla over lehera, and did not include thumri, ghazal, or sarangi in an effort to separate herself from some of the keystones of nautch repertoire (Chakravorty 2008, 51; Bhagchandani 2018, 53).

[159] Bhagchandani, Suman. "Institutions of Change: Kathak dance from Courts to Classrooms." *Chitrolekha International Magazine on Art & Design* 2.1, 2018.

[160] Bhagchandani also points out that while dancer Uday Shankar had already begun to mine Sanskritic history for dance material he could share on an international stage, Menaka was the first to do this specifically in the realm of Kathak (2018, 46). He writes: "Gradually, the distinction between Shankar's 'modern ballet' and classical Kathak was established by orchestrating skill through complex footwork and hand gestures by Menaka" (Bhagchandani 2018, 47).

[161] The *Abhinaya Darpan* is another ancient treatise on drama and movement composed by the 10th century C.E. philosopher Nandikeshvara.

52). Some of these works include *Krishna-Leela* and *Deva Vijaya Nritya*, both large-scale dance ballets illustrating stories from Hindu scripture and mythology (Bhagchandani 2018, 46).

I single out Madame Menaka's work here because this mixture of Orientalist subject matter and Western presentation style that she invented would become a hallmark of Indian classical dance performance. Menaka is credited with taking Kathak to an international audience in a big way through her award-winning performances at the Nazi-era Berlin Olympiad in 1936, to which one critic responded: "Madame Menaka has been undertaking a cultural work of vast importance, collecting and preserving in purest possible form the great wealth of tradition that lies in Indian dancing […] we were watching […] a vigorous national expression" (cited in Joshi 1989). It is clear from this statement that the image and discourse of Kathak as a pristine expression of an old and sacred Indian national heritage was being consumed at an international level and even lauded by white supremacist governments like Nazi Germany that centered around their own version of essentialized heritage. Kathak's fixed position as a preserved ancient form of nationalist identity was gaining momentum.

However, Chakravorty points out that, more than Menaka's contributions, it is the authenticating power invested by the state in *gharanedar* or hereditary (male) Kathak gurus that shaped the discourse around the dance's heritage and identity. It's useful to reiterate Walker's point here that gharana identities were largely formulated in the late 1800s when "competition for patronage and need for stability in the new marketplace convinced the dancers to make their identities official and then to project their histories back through time" (Walker 2014, 108). These (new) fixed identities allowed for a "civilizational lineage" of Kathak that was endorsed by the new Indian state when hereditary male practitioners from *gharanedar* lines were employed to lead Kathak Kendra, the state-funded national school of Kathak in Delhi, founded in

1964.[162] What Chakravorty and Walker describe as an intentional investment in patriarchal lines of power that passes over the hereditary and professional female artists who bore this dance into a new century, Kothari hails as the rediscovery of "old masters […] with a view to re-establish them in society as the repositories of art, and who in turn can pass on the precious knowledge following the guru-shishya parampara through institutions" (Kothari 1989, 179).

After Independence, the state government took over from the royal courts to become the primary patron of the arts in India, remaining so today. This structural reality finalizes the position of classicized Kathak as an icon of the nation, loaded with the ambitions of the central government. The institutionalization of Kathak dance, which includes the creation of dance schools, administrations, and funding bodies, as well as the formalization of certain gharanas through the patronage of the state, was repeatedly called for by dancers and dance advocates at the 1958 All India Seminar (Sangeet Natak, 2013). In addition to much language that framed Kathak as having some essential ancient (Hindu) quality that survived "in spite of" the influences of Muslim leaders and nautch women, speakers at this Seminar pointed out that the traditional nature of the classical dance must be maintained, and any exercise of Kathak's flexible potential must only be done by authenticated institutions led by chosen gurus.[163] Mohanrao Kallianpurkar reifies the work of these hereditary lines of male dancers even as he minimizes the contributions of their Muslim patrons:

> Under an alien rule, Kathak had undergone some change, as in dress, terminology, and also the mode of execution to some extent. It is really to be marveled that in spite of the great cultural impact, in spite of the social and religious upheavals, Kathak dance has

[162] Kathak was in fact the first classical dance to receive funding directly from the central government in India, according to a former director of the Kathak Kendra.
Ghosh, Sushmita. "Kathak Kendra then and now. *Pulse*, http://www.pulseconnects.com/kathak-kendra-then-and-now. Accessed October 30, 2019.
[163] Kallianpurkar, Mohanrao. "Kathak—An Analytical Study." *Papers from the first dance seminar, 1958*, special issue of *Sangeet Natak*, edited by Sunil Kothari, 47(1-4), 2013, pp. 134-140.

> survived at all and that too with many of its ancient traditions untouched (Kallianpurkar 2013, 136)

The Sangeet Natak Akademi, established in 1952, and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, established in 1950, became the two key agencies which decide, regulate, and enfranchise the nationalist image of Kathak dance both domestically and internationally. These organizations and the elite gurus of the independence era they employed began to develop Kathak along the lines of what Walker describes as the central paradox of Indian classical dance: "it is 'ancient' because of the evidence of ancient dance and drama forms provided in the *Natya Sastra*, yet 'modern,' as both choreography and pedagogy are twentieth-century creations" (Walker 2014, 114).

I suggest that this latest iteration of Kathak dance as national icon developed under ultimately similar circumstances as dance during the Sufi/Bhakti era, the Mughal era, and the British Raj, as described in the Introduction. Changes in patronage, political influence, religious tides, and social politics cast and recast Kathak in each period. All of these moments triggered "diversions" in the fluid life of Kathak dance, reformulating the purpose and contextual value of the form (Appadurai 1986). What is significant about the current state of Kathak is that its identity as an ancient, indigenous dance relies on an eradication of a long line of transformations and diversions in the dance's history when in reality, classicization is just another transformation of the dance, another point in a history of flexibility. In other words, Kathak's new fixed image exemplifies the dance's flexible history even as it attempts to erase it.

Standardization, Consolidation, and Legibility in Diasporic Kathak Curricula

"Every piece of paper counts."
–Mira Kaushik, Director, Akādemi

The tools through which the fixed status of Kathak as a classical dance is solidified are many. In the Indian national context, Chakravorty mentions the proliferation of state-funded dance festivals as a way through which the government was able to promote a "consensus narrative of classicism" by regulating the visibility of certain types of Kathak and standardizing the appreciation of the dance (Chakravorty 2008, 68). Chief among these festivals is the *Kalka-Bindadin Mohatsav* in the Indian capital of New Delhi, which celebrates the legacy of Lucknow gharana doyens Kalka and Bindadin Maharaj and was "the first of its kind uniting the entire Kathak world under one umbrella of the (Kathak) Kendra's patronage."[164] Chakravorty describes how the decision by India's central government to place members of the Lucknow gharana lineage in leadership at the state-run Kathak Kendra (initially led by Shambhu Maharaj in 1955, and then by his nephew Birju Maharaj in 1970) led to the delegitimization of other regional styles in favor of a monolithic Kathak (under "one umbrella") defined through the Lucknow style (Chakravorty 2008, 68-69).

The consolidation of the Kathak form under this single lineage at the macro-level had micro-level impacts. Birju Maharaj, bestowed by the state with a radiant authenticity bordering on godliness due to his connection to a long and traceable line of Brahmin Kathak practitioners, codified the vocabulary of Kathak in text as a standardized system. His book *Ang Kavya*[165] offers an incisive taxonomy of hand gestures, body positions, and basic movements of Kathak, with each description accompanied by a photo of Maharaj executing the movement.[166] Described by his chief disciple Saswati Sen as an antidote to the allegedly inauthentic and sloppy Kathak being

[164] "Man with a vision." *The Hindu*, March 26, 2012, https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-fridayreview/man-with-a-vision/article3231376.ece. Accessed on November 1, 2018.
[165] Maharaj, Birju. *Ang Kavya*. Har Anand Publications, 2002.
[166] The impulse to standardize dance through text can be seen in the histories of other Indian classical dances like Odissi and Bharatanatyam.

taught around the world, the book is a kind of neo-*Natya Sastra* made just for Kathak and imbued with a similar kind of authenticating power.[167] Mekhala Natavar points out how this kind of fixing of an essentially flexible dance form by a single powerful man could cause "the improvisational and multi-variegated styles present in Kathak [to] wane or even worse [be] labeled as 'incorrect' if they differ from Maharaj-ji's style."[168] Styles of movements and comportment that do not match Maharaj's picture in the book are automatically perceived and judged as less authentic, or not authentic, in some Kathak circles.

One key piece of the institutionalization and ultimately the fixing of Kathak as a homogenous form is the development of formal institutions and testing systems for dance. Leaders in the performing arts from the 1930s all the way to the 1990s have developed a litany of curricula and assessment or accreditation protocols for Kathak that each reflect a desire to fix the dance into a certain repertoire and vocabulary, *and* to create a system of recognition for Kathak practice that aligns with an international language of diplomas and degrees. Some of the key historical figures involved include Nirmala Joshi, who founded the Delhi School for Hindustani Music and Dance and the Bharatiya Kala Kendra in the 1940s and 1950s with Sumitra Charat Ram; Maya Rao, who organized her guru Shambhu Maharaj's teachings into categories of compositions, formalized a performance progression from slow to fast tempo in the 1950s, and founded the Natya Institute of Kathak and Choreography in Bangalore; and Reba Vidyarthi (née Chatterjee), who established the first five-year diploma syllabus at the Delhi Kathak Kendra in the 1960s (see Kothari 1989, Walker 2014, Bhagchandani 2018). Today, Kathak dancers across India can become certified at different levels through international institutions of performing arts

[167] Sen, Saswati. Personal interview. August 10, 2015.
[168] Natavar, Mekhala. *New Dances, New Dancers, New Audiences: Shifting Rhythms in the Evolution of India's Kathak Dance*. Ph.D. Thesis. University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1997. Pgs. 199-200.

like the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya Mandal, the Bhatkhande Music Institute,[169] the Prayag Sangeet Samiti, and others. They have each created their own syllabi for Kathak practice in an effort to both make Indian classical dance and music "available to all Indians, regardless of caste, religion, and gender," and to freeze these art forms in their new, classicized avatars (Bakhle 2005, 136).

To illustrate the effects of institutionalized syllabi in fixing the flexible practice of Kathak, I focus here on the uniquely diasporic example of the curricula laid out by the Imperial Society for Teachers of Dancing (ISTD). The ISTD is the U.K.'s largest dance examination board—they set standardized syllabi for forms ranging from ballet to ballroom, and facilitate exams by third-party assessors, who evaluate students based on the given syllabus and award them diplomas and certifications of various levels. The ISTD is a non-profit educational organization funded largely by its membership, but it has close ties to British state bodies like the Arts Council England. In the late 1990s, a group of U.K.-based Indian classical dance teachers and administrators led by the dance production house Akādemi[170] lobbied to have two Indian classical dances, Kathak and Bharatanatyam, included in the ISTD system. On one level, the impetus for this movement to include Kathak under ISTD's institutional banner was the perceived inconsistence of Kathak knowledge being circulated among the U.K.'s many dance teachers. According to director Mira Kaushik, who led the effort to create a standard Kathak syllabus,

> dancers and dance students [were] learning in one part of London, and going into another part, and realizing that the other teachers were completely distancing what you have learned. A huge amount of rivalry and dismissal existed. So, a lot of students had to start

[169] For an in-depth study of the Independence-era conditions that led to the creation and institutionalization of Hindustani classical music, see Bakhle 2005:
Bakhle, Janaki. *Two men and music: Nationalism in the making of an Indian classical tradition*. Oxford University Press on Demand, 2005.
[170] I will share more on Akādemi's role in shaping diasporic Kathak practice in the U.K. in Chapter 3.

> from scratch in their lives. And this was a very difficult situation, so I decided to put all the dancers together around the table one day to say, 'I think it's time for you to speak to each other. And see what you're doing.' So, we had about sixty-odd dance teachers, which we gathered. And together with them we came down to a consensus of criteria. To say, 'OK, when you have done this much, you are grade one. When you are done, you are grade two. Three, four, five.' So that if somebody has been studying in Harrow and if they go to Hounslow, at least your new teacher knows what you have done and she acknowledges somebody else's work. So that strategy led us to sort of set up a syllabus. And then I went to Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing and got them to pick it up.[171]

On another level, standardizing Kathak was also meant to address the fragmentation of local power among Indian dance practitioners in the U.K. by creating a dance system that was legible to the authorities in the U.K. dance field. "Indian dancers were giving all these Indian sort of certificates [certifications from India-based institutions], which were not worth the piece of paper they were written on," Kaushik said. "As a young kid who's aspiring to go to university […] every piece of paper counts. And ISTD is valid. So that's where ISTD became important for all the Indian kids. On the other hand, ISTD was also here, and local people didn't have to sort of run back to India" (Kaushik, interview with the author, 2015).

Kaushik's comments make three key points: 1) consistency of Kathak curricula is deemed important for dancers seeking long-term or professional training in a new reality where dancers and teachers are more mobile than they were fifty years ago, 2) diasporic dancers in the U.K. benefit from being recognized as British dancers by local institutions of power, and 3) India's value as the source for authentic knowledge and valuable certifications is diminishing among some diasporic practitioners, especially when it comes to Indian bureaucratic practices of accreditation which are seemingly unreliable and susceptible to fakery and corruption, and thus cannot corroborate the true level or quality of education a student has acquired. The committees Kaushik organized to create a Kathak syllabus succeeded in agreeing upon a standardized six-

[171] Kaushik, Mira. Personal interview. August 11, 2015.

year curriculum with detailed yearly syllabi[172] and testing protocols.[173] In the U.K. and some parts of the U.S.,[174] the codified exams of the ISTD provide "a pedagogic umbrella under which individual teachers shape their classes […] within hegemonic frameworks of western dance education" (Prickett 2007, 26).

Critics of ISTD remark that the consolidation of different *gharanas* or styles of dance into one syllabus is antithetical to the ontology of Kathak dance, mirroring critiques in India of the Lucknow gharana defining and dominating the field. For example, only two texts are referenced as sources and required reading in the Kathak ISTD syllabus: the 10th century Sanskrit text called the *Abhinaya Darpan*, which codifies classical dance movements and gestures broadly, and Birju Maharaj's *Ang Kavya* book, which I described earlier as a manual of newly named and codified postures and movements specific to Kathak. By aligning Maharaj's text with the centuries-old *Abhinaya Darpan*, the syllabus writers imbued Maharaj's style and perception of Kathak with significant authenticating value. Test-takers are required to reproduced the movements, postures, and gestures demonstrated by Maharaj—many of which he has codified for the first time—in order to pass certain parts of the practical and theory examination, further enabling the domination of his Lucknow style of Kathak practice in the U.K. The performance of thumri and ghazal are also required in the ISTD syllabus, though both of those repertoire items are central only to the Lucknow gharana. Though the syllabus itself claims that it "provides a structure equally suited to students of any of the different gharanas of

[172] "Syllabus Outline of Classical Indian Kathak Examinations." *Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing*, https://www.istd.org/about-us/documents/kathak-syllabus-outline/. Accessed April 02, 2019.
[173] I will note here that it is not the interest of this dissertation to analyze the content and detail of the ISTD syllabus beyond a few examples, though that area of research is very rich and has received some attention from Stacey Prickett (2004, 2007), Ann David (2009), and Avanthi Meduri (2014). Rather, I am interested in pointing out the fact of its creation as evidence of a motivation to fix Kathak.
[174] I know of at least one institution in the U.S.—Dancing Petals studio in Chicago—that employs the ISTD syllabus in their Kathak training. Many other US Kathak schools operate on syllabi created by music and dance institutions in India.

Kathak, without favouring one over another," ("Syllabus Outline," 3), the original document was devised by largely diasporic Lucknow gharana dancers[175] with direct ties to Maharaj's lineage or the Kathak Kendra school that he presided over in New Delhi. Critics further worry that a print-oriented codification of the dance can lead to one "right way" of dancing that threatens the variety of classical performance passed on through oral traditions (Prickett 2007, 33-34). For example, the ISTD syllabus is rooted in a Hindu practice of Kathak and requires test-takers to show mastery in Hindu poems, songs, and mythologies ("Syllabus Outline," 4, 14, 16, 18). The higher level Kathak syllabi also essentially determine a standard repertoire for professional dancers, including which types of songs and rhythmic cycles the dancers must engage in to receive certification and be considered "professional" (ibid, 31-33).

Once again, the basic tensions between flexibility and fixity becomes visible. Critics of ISTD worry that the syllabus creates a monolithic, fixed practice of Kathak that limits the stylistic variations of different gharanas—yet the historical development of those gharanas itself narrowed Kathak from a wider genre of dance to a series of segmented schools headed by particular patriarchal lineages, devaluing practitioners who did not fall into these lineages in the process (Walker 2014, 32). Maharaj's *Ang Kavya* publication and the ISTD syllabus are simply the latest hegemonic frameworks to determine what shape Kathak will take. They capitalize on the dance's flexibility in order to formally pin down the dance in alignment with the classical codes established in post-Independence India that differentiate Kathak from the other classical

[175] These include Sushmita Ghosh, Sujata Banerjee, Pratap Pawar, Pali Chandra, Sushma Mehta, and Gauri Sharma Tripathi
"ISTD Histories: Indian Classical Dance Faculty." *The Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing.*
https://www.istd.org/about-us/documents/istd-classical-indian-dance-history/
Accessed May 20, 2019.

dances and from Indian folk and popular dance forms, while also re-centering certain dominant hereditary figures as unquestionably fundamental to the dance's development.

The creation of the ISTD syllabus for Kathak dance can also be thought of as a "tournament of value" in Appadurai's terms (Appadurai 1986). The congregation of Indian classical dance faculty that produced the syllabus for Kathak led a conscious decision-making process to determine the new "central tokens of value" in the dance that were "consequential for the more mundane realities of power and value in ordinary life" (Appadurai 1988, 27). In other words, the meeting of Indian classical dance teachers, and the decisions they reached in the formation of an ISTD syllabus for Kathak, ultimately established the value of the dance in a way that affected the everyday teaching and practice of the form for people throughout the U.K. Even if dance teachers decided not to change their teaching methods or adhere to the ISTD guidelines, their work was now directly comparable to the values set out by the ISTD determinations. Thus, the ISTD syllabus and certification created a new kind of legibility for Kathak in the U.K. that framed non-certified dance practice as illegible. This shift also complicates the value assigned to the guru-shishya system of learning that is the reigning model in India in most contexts including universities and professional institutions, a model that has been imported to the U.K. as I will show in the next chapter. The development of a formal syllabus for Kathak assigned value to the ISTD accreditation system, which privileges the printed syllabus over customary models or oral/corporeal "acts of transfer."[176] Gurus used to determine the readiness of a dance students, and while they still might do so, the syllabus establishes a common set of guidelines for measurement and advancement of a student's dance level that limit the guru's individual influence on how a student's Kathak education may unfold.

[176] Taylor, Diana. *The archive and the repertoire*. Duke University Press, 2003.

Thus, the "hegemonic frameworks of western dance" that Prickett speaks of are also hegemonic frameworks of legibility that, in creating standards, grids, and shortcuts, produce known and knowable subjects (Foucault 1977). By legibility, I am referring to the definition put forward by James C. Scott in his book *Seeing Like a State* (1998): in outlining some of the state machinery that produces identifiable and controllable subjects, Scott describes how it was in the interest of authoritarian state governments in places like the Soviet Union, China, and Tanzania, to translate the intricate and diverse character of its constituents into a standardized entity that can be analyzed, documented and monitored (Scott 1998, 2). These standards discursively reshaped what were actually very localized ways of being and knowing, and in discursively reshaping them, produced new realities in the image of the standard. Scott writes that "society and the environment have been refashioned by state maps of legibility," reiterating the point that systems of legibility don't simply describe or categorize abstractly—they can produce reality (Scott 1998, 3).[177] I argue that in the case of Kathak dance in the U.K., systems of legibility like the ISTD have created a certain model of Kathak, and therefore a certain kind of Indian dancing subject, that is legible under the standards of British dance education. Even to individuals not familiar with the nuances of dance education in the U.K., the claim to a certificate from an official British institution immediately brings Kathak dancers into the wider fold of legitimized dance practice in the U.K.

An ISTD certificate puts a Kathak dancer on par with ballet and ballroom dancers in having gained the cultural capital of legible certification. It also affects how the dance is taught, framed, and embodied—Kathak becomes a collection of fragmented parts that can be separated,

[177] Diana Taylor's theory of the archive as a singularizing structure of knowledge (2003) and Dwight Conquergood's critique of scriptocentrist approaches to scholarship that value the written word over other ways of knowing (2002) both echo Scott's point about legibility and the production of knowledge.

repeated, reconstructed under codified systems of teaching and assessing. Armed with ISTD certificates that reshape Kathak to fit into British frames of dance pedagogy and assessment, Kathak dancers are better positioned to assert relevance and belonging in the British diasporic context. This assimilation into national systems of legibility in turn enables Kathak dancers to better court local patrons such as the Arts Council England and other British donors. Kathak thus continues to morph and respond to the underlying workings of power, knowledge, and legibility in its pursuit of material support and visibility.

I must also add that for diasporic communities, becoming legible in the British way is a way of being recognized as British national subjects, and as British dancers. It is a mitigation of the marginal and minoritarian position Kathak holds in the wider context of the British dance landscape. Those who, like Kaushik, led the effort for Kathak to be recognized by ISTD, speak of this achievement in terms of staking a claim to British culture, of fighting for their own inclusion in a mainstream dance culture. The pursuit of legibility in the diasporic context, therefore, is not only loaded with issues of rendering identity per hegemonic frameworks of British culture, it is also ripe with the possibility of gaining recognition and mitigating the sense of loss that is so often attached to conceptions of diasporic life (as I will explore more in the next chapter). As we have seen now throughout Kathak's history, the dance's flexibility is what allows dancers and cultural leaders to mold the form to meet the needs of changing sociopolitical contexts. In the case of the ISTD syllabus, it was

> designed to reflect holistic classical dance training while considering the needs and experiences of present-day students worldwide. Students of classical Indian dance, other than those in India, are in an environment that may not necessarily complement their experience of Kathak training. This syllabus, therefore, is based on the investing of time and effort in the early Grades, to create the necessary physical and cultural infrastructure for the dancer in training.[178]

[178] "The classical Indian dance faculty." *ISTD Histories,* https://www.istd.org/about-us/documents/istd-classical-indian-dance-history/. Accessed on April 2, 2019.

Kathak students in the U.K. are missing the environmental frame that is conducive to Kathak training, while students in India are already immersed in the codes, motifs, and shared aesthetic and cultural knowledge that are relevant to Kathak practice through their everyday life. The ISTD syllabus is in part a recognition of those missing cultural cues and an attempt to address those gaps in a structural way. The syllabus is self-consciously shaped to marry the transmission of Indian cultural information with a British way of learning. Such a standardization of the form, coupled with its entry into large-scale institutions, reckons with the new minoritarian context of Kathak training while opening up paths towards inclusion into national culture, even as it shuts out non-standardized practices of Kathak from wider recognition.

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The classicization of Kathak dance in India and its standardization in the U.K. continues to be a process of 1) recovering and institutionalizing the history, reputation, vocabulary, and appreciation of the dance to align with fixed ideas about heritage, aesthetics, and national identity, and 2) projecting those fixed ideas locally, nationally, and internationally through the instruments of pedagogy, performance, policymaking, and media representations; among networks of funders, presenters, and the general arts infrastructure; and to global audiences. The edges and frontiers of this process of fixing—the styles of dance that are marginalized, the new kinds of curricula that emerge, etc.—are where the inherent flexibility of the dance becomes palpable once again.

In the chapters that follow, I will demonstrate how attempts to fix the dance play out against the exercise of Kathak's flexibility in various case study institutions in London and Los

Angeles. In describing this tension in diasporic Kathak practice, I highlight the experiences of Indian diasporic subjects who dance on the borders of fixity and flexibility. The foundational structures of taal and rasa frame these practices of Kathak and act as key points of departure and return for the flexible tenets of improvisation, creative interpretation, and riyaaz that diasporic Kathak practice engages with (or, in some cases, distances itself from). I will explore how the changing contextual conditions that *enforce* fixed positions for the dance and its dancers in the diaspora also *produce* new ways of practicing Kathak, implicitly calling upon the inherent flexibility of the dance to do so. The productive interplay between fixity and flexibility in the context of the diaspora, as managed by individuals and institutional forces, is the subject of the next two chapters.

Chapter 2

Fixing Kathak Dance Through the Heritage Model

In this chapter I explore the heritage model of Kathak dance, which I describe as the ways in which Kathak is embedded within discourses of cultural difference, authenticity, and continuity. I show how arts institutions in the U.K. and U.S. and Indian diasporic subjects who align with the heritage model carve out a certain type of Indian diasporic identity that is fixed to singular notions of Indian culture rooted in the past. I begin by introducing a new conception of diasporic Kathak dance as an inalienable practice, applying Annette Weiner's theory of inalienable possessions to practices like Kathak that are imbued with authenticating power within certain social groups. As an inalienable practice, heritage-model Kathak is loaded with essentialized cultural significance. I argue that cultural institutions and Indian diasporic subjects fix Kathak dance by investing in a theory of the dance's inalienability to Indian identity, thereby enclaving the form within Indian cultural in-groups. As I will demonstrate in the next section, positioning Kathak as inalienable to a singular Indian identity is one way a minority group like Indian diasporic subjects can consolidate power in the mixed context of cities like London and Los Angeles. A heritage model practice of Kathak is a productive form of "strategic essentialism," through which diasporic subjects can organize around common practices and values as part of a political project of identity-formation.[179] While this kind of strategically essentialized practice of Kathak dance can have advantages in terms of simplifying the negotiation of multiple identity positions in the diasporic context, I focus this dissertation on

[179] Spivak, G.C. "Subaltern Studies. Deconstructing Historiography." *The Spivak Reader*, edited by D. Landry & G. MacLean, Routledge, 1996.

critically evaluating these strategies to uncover the motivations and techniques behind certain entrenched framings of Kathak dance.

Focusing on two case studies—the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's London branch and the Leela Institute for the Arts in Los Angeles—this chapter looks at how institutions and the dancing subjects who move through them strategically fix the practice of Kathak dance to static notions of Indian cultural heritage. Both institutions I focus on in this chapter rely on a recourse to a glorious Indian past as part of their formation of a diasporic Indian identity, deploying particular strategies of training, performance, and representation to lift up ideals of guru-shishya lineages and fixed Kathak practice in lieu of a flexible and responsive notion of Kathak dance.

I will show how the discourse and practice of Kathak at the Bhavan fixes the dance to Hindu devotional practice specifically, to a system of pedagogy that values mimesis and continuity over individual expression and creativity, and to an archive of affect and temporality that constitutes a phantasmic, authentic India of the past (Mankekar 2015). I complicate the notion of a heritage-model practice of Kathak through the example of the Leela Institute and its rigorous adherence to the practice of an iconic guru distinguished by his diasporic reformulation of the dance. I will investigate how, even as the Leela Institute circulates an image of Kathak that is responsive to transnational shifts and encounters, they still rely on heritage model mechanisms that fix the dance to the past through the value they place on lineage.

I focus the bulk of this chapter on the example of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan to show the breadth of heritage-model constructions of Kathak and how they interact with each other. The Leela Institute engages with many of the same methods of fixing Kathak as the Bhavan; however, in this chapter I use the example of the Leela Institute to explore a different, more nuanced expression of those methods that center the diasporic experience in their approaches to

fixity. The Leela Institute also features in Chapter 3, where I focus on the organization's attempts to capitalize on Kathak's flexible potential to gain broader relevance in Los Angeles. I point this out to underline the idea that fixity and flexibility, illustrated in this study through the heritage model and the integrative model of Kathak practice, are not mutually exclusive. The practice and discourse of Kathak at the Leela Institute is a prime example of how one organization can engage with both fixity and flexibility as part of their navigation of Kathak dance and identity in the diasporic context.

Kathak dance in the heritage model is used to shore up fixed notions of Indian cultural identity tethered to the past. Through my study of these two institutions, I wish to highlight not only the power of institutions to shape and maintain identity boundaries in the diasporic setting, but also the agency of individuals who interact with these institutions by selectively engaging with or distancing themselves from the discourses of identity promoted by these institutions. In doing so I merge examples of individualized, bottom-up processes of identification with top-down institutional strategies to show they both affect definitions and practices of Kathak.

SECTION I: Kathak as Inalienable Practice in the Heritage Model

Before exploring the specific ways that institutions construct a practice of Kathak dance that ties the form to singular notions of authenticity and heritage, it would be useful to dwell on the motivating factors behind heritage model framings of the dance. I argue that such renderings of Kathak in the U.S. and U.K., which underscore the exceptional status of the dance as fixed to certain markers of "authentic" heritage, are part of a larger conception of diasporic movement

and loss.[180] As Purnima Mankekar explains, "because the chronotype of rupture implies the splitting of a priori authentic subject, of severance from 'context,' another trope conjoined with diaspora is that of loss—loss of homeland, of 'tradition,' of roots, of authenticity," (Mankekar 2015, 27). For those who experience this kind of diasporic rupture, Kathak can become a tool for defying and/or recouping from a real or perceived loss. In the mixed milieus of London and Los Angeles, the multiplicity of cultural influences leads some diasporic Indian subjects to assert their own difference and unique cultural identity, stoking heritage-model understandings of Kathak that are built around reifying difference and consolidating Indian identity.

I suggest that the case study institutions described in this chapter frame Kathak as a source of authenticating power for Indian diasporic subjects that sets them apart from their British and American counterparts. This authenticating power relies on forwarding a connection between Kathak dance and the phantasm of India, a connection that is both sensorial and discursive. I apply Annette Weiner's theory of inalienable possessions to the practice of Kathak in the heritage model to show how, for many diasporic subjects, the dance is framed as inalienable to Indian national identity.[181]

In studying the trade and gift behaviors among social groups,[182] Weiner looked at what was kept out of exchange between community groups in order to learn more about the nature of special objects in these societies. Her study revealed a class of objects so significant to the identity and authority of a group that they needed to be protected from exchange: these objects

[180] Notions of loss and recouping from loss are not confined to diasporic experience; as described in the previous chapter, the project of nationalism in India itself was built around recouping a glorious Indian past.
[181] Weiner, Annette B. *Inalienable Possessions: the paradox of keeping-while giving*. University of California Press, 1992.
[182] Weiner's theory of the inalienable possession resulted from her revisitation of Marcel Mauss' work in the Trobriand Islands. In his 1925 work *The Gift*, Mauss took a detailed look at the gift economy and its resulting social relations among different communities in the Pacific Northwest, Polynesia and Melanesia. He was concerned with what and how things were exchanged, while Weiner went on to look at what objects were kept out of exchange.

she termed inalienable possessions. Inalienable possessions "are imbued with the intrinsic and ineffable identities of their owners which are not easy to give away […] the loss of such an inalienable possession diminishes the self and by extension, the group to which the person belongs" (Weiner 1992, 6). What makes an inalienable possession so potent is the fact that these objects are "embedded with culturally authenticating ideologies […] that give shape and drive to political processes […] these encompassing ideologies are active forces that both validate the absolute value of inalienable possessions and verify the difference among individuals who own these coveted objects" (Weiner 1992, 10). These objects can be a family heirloom as simple as one's grandmother's wedding ring—something that has meaning and purpose in the family's history and identity. Or, they can be as significant as the crown jewels, which have clear meaning and purpose in family, national, and state identity.

Inalienable possessions, like the crown jewels, are thus imbued with power through their position within a group's cosmology. Broader than religion, government, or family tradition alone, cosmologies "are the cultural resources that societies draw on to reproduce themselves" (Weiner 1992, 4). As authenticators of a group's cosmology, inalienable possessions become the material objectifications of cosmology, and therefore serve as "active forces in social life […] mediating systems of meaning" (Weiner 1992, 11). Weiner's study is an investigation into how subjective value is created within, for, and by certain material objects, and how control over those objects accords authority and the power of meaning-making to its owners.

Building on this theory of inalienable objects, I propose that Weiner's argument also applies to certain practices that hold similar authenticating power. I introduce the concept of *inalienable practices* to explore how embodied acts such as Kathak dance can meet the criteria of inalienability set out by Weiner originally in relation to material objects. Heritage model

renderings of Kathak that circulate fixed notions of origins, lineage, and cultural singularity suggest a strong investment in dance practice as a method of consolidating and reproducing a certain kind of inalienable Indian identity that also verifies difference from the mainstream. Maintaining difference is one method diasporic subjects can use to reject their passive incorporation into mainstream cultural values, norms, and practices that may not resonate with them. Consolidation around a particular identity that is marked by difference has been built into Kathak since classicization; as Margaret Walker points out,

> the process of building national pride as part of the [Indian] independence movement, however, also involved embracing the legacy of the Orientalists: an idea of cultural continuity that reached back into antiquity and a scholarly discourse that privileged a pure Hindu past. The recovery of indigenous Indian tradition, 'untainted by "external" influences of the European or Islamic world' (Singh 2003:186) was crucial to establishing a sense of dignity and distinctly Indian identity in the face of British imperial occupation and Anglicist scorn, and it was in this environment of political struggle and resistance that music and dance were revived and recreated (Walker 2014, 109).

Establishing the inalienability of classical music and dance practices like Kathak to "indigenous Indian tradition" was a conscious effort and core part of the nationalization process in the subcontinent. When I speak about the constructed inalienability of Kathak dance to a fixed Indian identity in the context of the diaspora, that construction continues a history of tethering Kathak to exceptional Indianness, dating back to the mid-20th century. This is important to underscore, because

> without question or scrutiny, Western dance and theater circuits have generally adopted and accepted the notion that Indian classical dances serve as quintessential representations of Indian authenticity. It is rarely acknowledged that the present representations of classical Indian dance are extensions of the nationalist discourse of postcolonial and colonial India.[183]

[183] Chakravorty, Pallabi. "From interculturalism to historicism: Reflections on classical Indian dance." *Dance Research Journal* 32.2 (2000): 108-119. Pg. 108.

In the diaspora, heritage model formations that center around the inalienability of Kathak to quintessential "Indian authenticity" also gain new capital in the eyes of Western evaluators like funding bodies and audience members, for whom "the female dancer as the ethnic minority woman is a commodity [who] functions to iterate and maintain 'difference' to mainstream communities" (Srinivasan 2011, 168).

The mission statement of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's London branch, the largest Indian classical music and dance institution in the U.K., is a prime example of how practices like Kathak dance are framed as essentially inalienable to Indian identity. The statement clearly and ardently invokes a desire to maintain the culture of India's past:

> Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's fundamental purpose is to preserve for the posterity, the unsurpassed and indisputable beauty of Indian Culture, art and heritage. Although the current day has borne witness to the calamitous erosion of the glorious past, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's concerted efforts have been commendably successful in reversing the effects of the largely inglorious present.[184]

This passage is a translation of what I will call the "cosmology of the Bhavan," a cosmology that summarizes the heritage model of identification. The Bhavan relies on "traditional values" of the past to reproduce Indian identity in the "inglorious present." Even the name of their organization reveals as much— "Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan" can be translated to "House of Indian Knowledge." The past serves an important ideological purpose for the community at the Bhavan. In this type of cosmology, the act of classical Indian dance carries significant authenticating power. The stated goal of the Bhavan is to revive the cultural treasures of the Indian past, exemplifying Weiner's point that "individuals and groups work with exacting care to recreate the past for the present" and "secure permanence in a serial world that is always subject to loss and

[184] The Bhavan's website was recently redesigned, but the archived site can be found here: "About Us." *Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan,* https://web.archive.org/web/20150811020039/http://bhavan.net/about-us/about-bhavan/overview. Accessed August 11, 2015.

decay" (Weiner 1992, 7). The means of securing such permanence for the Bhavan is the proliferation of the classical Indian arts, loaded symbols of pre-colonial heritage and consolidated Indian nationhood. These performing arts thus become the inalienable practices through which the community at the Bhavan reproduces diasporic Indian group identity, history, and authority. The discourses of preservation and authenticity that surround dance at the Bhavan, and the affective charge of practices and objects related to "the classical," position Kathak dance primarily as a cosmological validator of Indian Culture with a capital "C."

According to Weiner, what inalienable possessions and practices do for a community is promote historical consciousness and disguise change (Weiner 1992, 7). I argue that these needs in the heritage model of Kathak is a response to the minoritarian condition of diaspora. In this context, Kathak is reformulated as a cosmologically significant inalienable practice that produces and reinforces a fixed Indian identity, one that moors diasporic subjects to an identifiable point of reference. Further, Kathak as inalienable practice offers a pointedly exclusive entry point into a version of Indian identity that resists imperialist intrusions and cultural appropriation, and responds to the trope of loss that is often affixed to the diasporic experience.

The value for guru lineages in Kathak dance practice is part of an effort to impede change, alleged Western pollution of the dance practice, and other non-classical influences by tracing unbroken lines of inheritance. As Srinivasan points out in her study of Bharatanatyam practice in the U.S., a discourse of essential difference and the role of women in upholding that difference plays out through dance:

> Immigrant anxieties about cultural miscegenation and the loss of 'pure' culture can be laid to rest when the community's women, who symbolize the Indian nation, perform and stage immigrant 'nostalgia' on their own bodies. Bharata Natyam pedagogy, then, becomes an attempt to instill model Indian culture on ethnic Indian women. This model separates itself from mainstream American culture, and its audience prides itself on an uninterrupted two-thousand-year-old tradition that has absolutely no link to U.S. culture.

> In other words, the community places itself somewhere between its own orientalist imagination of itself and the struggle for cultural citizenship in the United States […] Indian diasporic communities […] help sustain the divisions between mainstream and minority communities and the myth of Americanness (Srinivasan 2011, 40).[185]

Bhavan Kathak student Deepika Kathrani echoes the desire for continuity and differentiation:

> There is a deep fear that, in twenty or thirty years' time, who's going to be doing these art forms once these big gurus are gone? And so that's another fear, and why we introduce Kathak as an Indian dance from north India, because we almost feel like we are trying to preserve it and hold its identity, which we're worried is going to go away. And I think that's why sometimes it feels important that these are Indian girls[186] and they're going to do an Indian dance.[187]

The value for lineages of dance practice in the heritage model also illustrates the role of transmission in maintaining the authority of inalienable practices. The rhetoric around classical dance as something Indians in the diaspora are morally obligated to protect and uphold speaks to what Weiner describes as "enormous energy and intensity […] expended in efforts to transmute or transcend the effects of deterioration and degeneration" (Weiner 1992, 7).

Weiner argues that inalienable possessions have a unique role in creating reservoirs of power within a community; this is done through a process of exchange she calls "keeping-while-giving" (Weiner 1992, 10). Inalienable possessions cannot be exchanged freely in either a gift economy or commodity marketplace because their potency as cosmological authenticators is too powerful a mechanism to give up in exchange. Inalienable possessions are therefore notably held

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[185] It is important to note that heritage model politics of difference and cultural boundaries is not limited to diasporic or immigrant cultures. Srinivasan goes on to show how American modern dance grew out of an appropriation and reframing of Indian dance in the service of producing a differentiated American dance practice: "Asian practices were ultimately needed to help define and constitute the boundaries of whiteness and Americanness […] As white bourgeois women absorbed and restaged dance practices from India, Indian performing bodies and their labor were no longer needed. The state cemented this exclusion with anti-Asian immigration laws. Thus, the kinesthetic legacy of nautch dancing women was absorbed by white artists such as St. Denis and rendered invisible within the North American modern dance project. Indian dancers were denied assimilation within U.S. citizenship discourses, even though their bodily labor was necessary and inherent in the evolution of U.S. modern dance" (Srinivasan 2011, 61).

[186] Kathrani most likely was referring to the reality of the Kathak student body at the Bhavan being comprised almost entirely of females, but her reference to "Indian girls" is embedded in a larger discourse of Indianness in which "women's identity becomes synonymous with Indian tradition and the Sanskritized Hindu doctrines of ancient India" (Chakravorty 2000, 11).

[187] Kathrani, Deepika. Personal interview. May 25, 2017.

back from exchange. Because inalienable possessions are held back, "exchange does not produce a homogeneous totality, but rather is an arena where heterogeneity is determined […] the ownership of an inalienable possession establishes and signifies marked differences between parties" (Weiner 1992, 10). Thus, inalienable possessions are one way of consolidating the power and position of a group by throwing up boundaries between insiders authenticated by their possession of the inalienable object and outsiders who don't have that same access. Ownership of the inalienable possession offers authority, confirms difference, and establishes hierarchy between owners and non-owners, insiders and outsiders, those who are authenticated and those who are not. This investment in difference was key to Kathrani's desire to stay at the Bhavan, as she found other Kathak classes in London to be "too British": "I was just like, how is this different from the rest of my life? It's just hanging out with a bunch of people" (Kathrani, interview with the author, 2017). Dr. Mattur Nandakumara, the director of the Bhavan, is aware of the self-authenticating power inherent in creating cultural difference:

> Imagine when you come out of India, then you are thrown into a place where everybody else is different [...] you then start realizing [...] what really gives you strength is your connection with your culture. If you don't have, you feel you are lost. Because everybody's connected with something or other. When you are strong in your culture, even if you accept the other cultures, still you will be strong. If you don't have this, you will neither belong here, nor there.[188]

His insistence on the need for cultural boundaries and difference can read as both a call-to-arms and as a warning to diasporic subjects who reject a heritage-model investment in Indian culture. It also echoes the ever-present question of auto-Orientalization among Indian diasporic subjects, as his comments suggest that Eastern and Western cultures are essentially binary and incompatible.

[188] Mattur Nandakumara. Personal Interview. August 12, 2015.

One can see these boundaries in the performance of Kathak at the Bhavan, where the dance is often marketed as "ancient," "transcendent," its depths and complexities not accessible to people not in the classical or cultural in-group. In most Kathak performances at the Bhavan, there is little explanation of the either the expressive nritya storytelling components or the rhythmic complexity of the nritta portions. Appreciation for the nuances of performance is limited to in-group members who can identify the stories being shared, the imagery being evoked, the rhythmic risks and twists that are playing out. This is in line with the Bhavan's goal to create opportunities for their dancers to perform for connoisseur audiences and to promote Kathak as a mode of asserting and maintaining Indian cultural identity in the U.K. (Nandakumara, interview with the author, 2015). Performances are opportunities to solidify and even celebrate classical in-group status.

I argue that the motivation behind setting up such boundaries between in-group and out-group is the power inherent in creating difference. In the mixed milieu of the diaspora, the stakes of certain national or cultural identity configurations are higher than they are in the context of the home country, where many of them are taken for granted or circulate as part of the norm. Institutions like the Bhavan garner support in the Indian community of London precisely because they offer group authentication and power via the circulation and reproduction of dance and other cultural forms constructed as inalienable practices. Symbols like Kathak can be "mobilized by subordinated peoples as means of consolidating a political challenge. Such a political assertion of identity could potentially constitute a progressive force, although [...] politics of cultural pride may prove contradictory, as, for instance, if cultural practices are treated as reified symbols of an essentialist historic past" (Brah 2005, 91). Kathak dance in the heritage model falls squarely into the paradox of essentialist discourse and pride in difference. Weiner observes

that "keeping some things transcendent and out of circulation in the face of all the pressures to give them to others is a burden, a responsibility, and at best, a skillful achievement" (Weiner 1992, 7-8). Institutions like the Bhavan certainly presents themselves as important because of their achievement of preserving the purity of the classical forms, a "vision of permanence," in the face of a "calamitous erosion of the glorious past" ("About Us"). If "an individual's role in social life is fragmentary unless attached to something of permanence," then the people of the Bhavan have found permanence in their investment in the inalienable practice of the classical arts.[189]

Sometimes the declaration of preservation is more specific, as in the case of the Leela Institute for the Arts in Los Angeles. As will be described in more detail later in this chapter, the Leela Institute invests not necessarily in the preservation of Indian culture writ large, but in the lineage of one particular guru from India: Chitresh Das. The "Lineage" section of the Institute's website reads: "The principal artists of Leela are proud senior disciples of Das and are dedicated to preserving the rich legacy they have inherited while continuing to advance the art form of kathak."[190] The Leela Institute's version of the heritage model of Kathak dance is based on the same values for cultural continuity rooted in an Indian past, but its cosmology more specifically revolves around one iconic figure and his direct line of influence. I will explore how the Leela Institute's fixing of Kathak to one guru exemplifies a heritage model practice of the dance while still signaling the dance's inherent flexibility in a later section in this chapter.

I've offered a theorization of Kathak dance as inalienable practice to reflect on one possible motivation behind the fixing of Kathak dance to particular notions of Indian identity and

[189] Weiner, Annette B. "Inalienable wealth." *American ethnologist* 12.2 (1985): 210-227.
[190] "Lineage." *The Leela Institute for the Arts*, 2019, https://theleelainstitute.org/about/lineage/. Accessed March 13, 2019.

heritage in the context of diaspora. This study is not only about how Kathak is fixed and formulated in the diaspora—it is also about *why* Kathak becomes fixed. The unstable and variegated practice of Kathak dance in the diaspora cannot be separated from the intersections of structures of power, interests of institutions, and needs of individuals that constitute diasporic life. The outcomes of heritage model approaches to Kathak and cultural identity is also variegated; at the Bhavan for example, some dancers find "dance at the Bhavan to be as authentic as dance in India,"[191] and some find the Bhavan to be stuck in "an India of the 1960s" where Kathak is rendered as "a museum piece, an antiquated artifact."[192] Heritage model renderings of Kathak in the diaspora are not uncontested, as I will explore in Chapter 3.

For the remainder of this chapter, I will take a close look at both the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's London branch and the Leela Institute for the Arts in Los Angeles to draw out some of the specific ways in which fixed notions of Kathak are constructed, circulated, and received in the diaspora.

SECTION II: Preservation and Continuity at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London

"Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's fundamental purpose is to preserve for the posterity, the unsurpassed and indisputable beauty of Indian Culture, art and heritage. With characteristic elements of insurmountable grace and magnificence as has been in the past, the sheen has fallen back in the current age. With besetting elements aiming to decimate the entrenched grandeur that has gone into hiding, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan seeks to revive and revamp this rather discomfiting atmosphere. Although the current day has borne witness to the calamitous erosion of the glorious past, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's concerted efforts have been commendably successful in reversing the effects of the largely inglorious present. Society has definitely become impervious to the systemic corrosion of traditional values but again, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's pursuit in revitalizing the vitiated environment have certainly gratified the present day Indian mind that venerates traditional heritage and culture"
— "About Us," Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan website, September 2015.

[191] Arora, Dhiya. Personal interview. May 27, 2017.
[192] Source requested anonymity.

The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's London branch was founded in 1972 as the first foreign arm of the India-based arts and education organization. Born from an educational trust left by lawyer and politician Kanhaiyalal Maneklal Munshi in 1938, the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan grew into an international collection of private schools and education centers. There are 105 branches in India, and five branches abroad (in London, New York, Abu Dhabi, Doha, and Sydney).

While the larger Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan organization runs accredited schools and colleges in India with subject areas ranging from the arts and literature to engineering and info-tech, the London Bhavan focuses only on the classical Indian arts, yoga, and languages. The London Bhavan, which I will henceforth refer to as "the Bhavan," offers classes in four Indian classical dances (Kathak, Bharatanatyam, Odissi, and Kuchipudi), six Indian classical instruments (tabla, mridangam, veena, sitar, Carnatic violin, and Hindustani flute), three vocal traditions (Hindustani classical, Carnatic classical, and the repertoire of Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore known as *Rabindrasangeet*), four Indian languages (Hindi, Sanskrit, Tamil, and Bengali), and three kinds of yoga (hatha yoga, Iyengar yoga, and ashtanga yoga). The Bhavan also offers theory classes for Carnatic music and Indian art history classes. Eight full-time faculty members and twelve part-time faculty members serve more than 900 students at the Bhavan (Nandakumara, interview with the author, 2015). The London branch receives partial funding from its India-based parent organization, but much of its sustaining funding comes from Arts Council England and corporate sponsorship from Air India, software giant Infosys, and the State Bank of India.

The key link I wish to point out between the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan London and its parent organization is that they both claim to be secular and apolitical. The Bhavan at all levels claims closest alignment with the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi that insist on a personal

commitment to one's motherland and a value for India's cultural legacy, along with what we might consider an implicit embrace of Gandhi's code of ethics, built around tenets of non-violence, religious pluralism, service to the public, and an endorsement of what he saw as positive Indian values. Munshi, the founder, is extolled for his connection to

> his mother's songs and stories about the sages and seers of India's past. The heritage that these master-spirits represented was ingrained in the young Munshi deeply [...] his sense of India as the Motherland of the Spirit impressed him irreversibly. And so, as he moved professionally and politically, rung by rung, it was with a sense of pride in the cultural, intellectual and spiritual heritage of India. India was for him not just a nation but an ongoing civilization; not an accident of history but a design of destiny. For him the vitality of Indian culture and its self-renewing greatness constituted a living principle.[193]

Munshi is said to have inspired a "pan-Indian movement, a pan-Indian spirit and a pan-Indian ethos which would present to contemporary Indians, and to the world at large, a glimpse of the composite magnificence of ancient times" (ibid).

According to the director of the London Bhavan, Dr. Mattur Nandakumara, the institution's goal is also to reveal and promote the universality embedded in Indian classical arts. He claims that the Indian classical arts, including Kathak, are essentially accessible—with proper motivation, training, and execution, Indian classical dance taps into a higher realm of human feeling that arches well over such divisions as ethnicity, nationality, and culture (Nandakumara, interview with the author, 2015). Nandakumara used the word "spirituality" to define the connecting thread that binds Indian classical dance to all people, stating that:

> Spirituality is the question that is not confined to India. It is confined to all human beings: who are we? That is not Indian or anything. That has no religion. It is trying to search for your true identity, who you are, what will make your life more beautiful, more meaningful. Art forms are the rivers that will allow you to reach that ocean of wisdom (Nandakumara, interview with the author, 2015).

[193] "Kulapati K.M. Munshi." *Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan*, http://www.bhavans.info/vision/munshi.asp.

I would argue that this description touches on some of themes of flexibility I outlined in previous chapter. Nandakumara is talking about the Indian classical arts as conduits for deeper exploration of self and subjectivity that is personal and experiential, rather than collective or prescribed. To that end, the Bhavan is ostensibly open to anyone who wishes to take classes in Indian classical dance and music, art forms that Nandakumara feels are especially suited to attaining spirituality, wisdom, and connection to humanity.

However, through the course of my fieldwork I observed the Bhavan to be almost exclusively enclaved within the Indian community of London. Classes, workshops, and performances were attended almost entirely by Indians who represented a mix of recent immigrants and long-time U.K. residents and British citizens.[194] Though based out of an old church in the ethnically diverse neighborhood of West Kensington (rather than in a majority-Asian neighborhood like Southall) since 1978, the Bhavan remains removed from wider British society. Classes take place on-site, and most of their performances are held at the Bhavan's in-house theater. Kathak classes and performances I attended between 2015 and 2017 were comprised almost entirely of students of Indian background at all performance levels. While advertising for the Bhavan appears on highly visible platforms like the London Underground, there appears to be little effort to bring non-Indian communities into meaningful contact with the Bhavan. Instead, Nandakumara said the goal of the Bhavan was to bring students into contact with an "informed audience" of dance and music connoisseurs, an audience that I would argue is invariably majority Indian (Nandakumara, interview with the author, 2015).

[194] In our interview, Nandakumara stated that the yoga classes at the Bhavan are comprised largely on non-Indians students. My assessment is based off witnessing the classes and performances of Indian classical arts and music students at the Bhavan, as yoga and other subject areas are out of the purview of this study.

That said, the Bhavan does pride itself on its relationship with the British state. The Prince of Wales is an honorary lifetime member of the Bhavan, and several other patrons are either local politicians or British Indian OBE[195] awardees.[196] The Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall visited the Bhavan in 2005 to inaugurate its refurbished auditorium, named Mountbatten Auditorium for Lord Louis Mountbatten, the last Viceroy to India who was appointed to oversee India's transition to independence in 1947. This homage to colonial nostalgia is at first startling at an institution that is centered around uplifting the presumed heritage of precolonial India. However, because Mountbatten was instrumental in expediting the independence process and deciding to partition Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan,[197] he is viewed by many Hindu Indians in a positive light. Mountbatten was one of the reasons institutions like the Bhavan are able to conceive of a singularized Hindu India. Naming their performance space after Mountbatten is also one way the Bhavan glosses over the calamitous effects of British involvement in Indian history and eases their relationship with the modern British state. The Bhavan will be receiving more than £500,000 from Arts Council England, a state funding body that awards grants to non-profit arts organizations, between 2018 and 2022, continuing decades of financial support from the council.[198] At its Indian Independence Day event in August of 2015, the Bhavan brought to the stage the mayor of Hammersmith and Fulham, the borough in which the Bhavan is located. Mayor Mercy Umeh

[195] The OBE, or Order of the British Empire, is awarded to Britons who have had a "major local role in any activity, including people whose work has made them known nationally in their chosen area."
"Nominate someone for an honor or award." *Gov.UK*, https://www.gov.uk/honours/types-of-honours-and-awards. Accessed on March 29, 2019.
[196] "Patrons," *Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan*, https://www.bhavan.net/patrons, Accessed on February 20, 2019
[197] Both the decision to partition the subcontinent and Mountbatten's rush to announce independence and save British reputations played a serious role in the chaotic transition to independence that resulted in mass communal violence and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians.
[198] "The Data: 2018-2022." *Arts Council England*, https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/national-portfolio-2018-22/more-data-2018-22. Accessed February 22, 2019.

proclaimed her pride in the fact that her borough was home to "the largest Indian cultural institution outside of India," housed in the old church Gandhi himself used to visit (observation, May 21, 2017).

I suggest that the nature of the Bhavan's place in British society has been self-consciously molded into a marginal but recognizable enclave of Indian national treasures. I show how, despite personal claims to universality and accessibility by its director, the Bhavan has invested in the nationalist project of framing Indian classical arts as essential to a threatened Indian heritage of the past. In doing so the institution has created a type of Kathak discourse and practice that is fixed to an archive of affect and temporality, to use Mankekar's framework, that saturates their version of Indian "Culture" with feelings of cultural belonging rooted in an imagined, glorious Indian past. Through the course of this section, I hope to show how the Bhavan constructs Indian Culture[199] as centered around the past, and shed light on some of the power dynamics relating to recognition and self-preservation that may motivate this kind of heritage model approach to Indian cultural production in the diaspora. I focus on 1) the lens of Hinduism that is at the foundation of the Bhavan's framing of dance, 2) the institution's investment in lineage through the close guru-shishya or teacher-student tradition of learning, and 3) the affective intensities of Kathak dance at the Bhavan to show how the organization characterizes Kathak dance as essentially fixed to an uncomplicated Indian national heritage that stands in contrast to, rather than intermingled with, British national culture.

[199] I use "Culture" over "culture" when referring to the Bhavan's particular construction of Indian culture.

Hinduism as Indian Culture at the Bhavan

On the evening of Friday July 31, 2015, more than fifty girls and women descend into a basement dance studio at the Bhavan carrying handfuls of flowers and boxes of Indian sweets. They whisk off their shoes, tidy their hair and outfits, and enter the studio for *Guru Purnima*, the sacred day celebrating teachers. Guru Purnima occurs on the day of the full moon (*purnima*) that occurs in the lunar month of *Ashadha* in the Hindu calendar (usually June or July in the Gregorian calendar).

The students know exactly what to do. They immediately approach Abhay Shankar Mishra, the longtime Kathak guru at the Bhavan, seated in a chair in the far corner of the room. He is surrounded by smoking sticks of incense, piles of *ghungroos* (dance bells), and photographs of the teachers who came before him. The corner of the studio has been transformed into a nearly floor-to-ceiling altar, not only to Mishra's gurus (and his guru's gurus), but to the lineage of visiting faculty member and Kathak star Saswati Sen. Sen is an international dance artist based in New Delhi, India, who, though an accomplished and prolific performer in her own right, is largely respected in the Kathak community as the senior disciple of maestro Birju Maharaj of the Lucknow gharana. Photos and paintings of Maharaj, his father, uncles, and grandfather hang on the walls, ornamented with fresh garlands of flowers and auspicious sandalwood *tilak* markings on their foreheads. Mishra and Sen are both seated in chairs, waiting for students to approach them and seek blessings for themselves and their ghungroo (dance bells). The students approach the gurus and bend down to touch their feet in a gesture of prostration, or *pranam*. Some simply reach their hand out towards the gurus' knees and bring the hand back to their heart, while other get down on their knees to physically touch the gurus' feet with their hands. Symbolically, they are humbling themselves by taking the dust of their guru's

feet. The gurus raise their right hand, sometimes touching the students on their head or shoulders, and whisper *aashirwaad* or blessings like "*jeete raho"* ("stay alive" or "stay well") or "*khush raho*" ("stay happy").

The ghungroo are then lined up under the portraits of the ancestral gurus, and Sen leads the entire group in a religious ceremony or *puja* honoring the teachers and honoring the dance form through the acknowledgement of the bells. The flowers and sweets are offered to the gurus' portraits, to Mishra and Sen, and then to the students. Mishra rises and seeks the blessing of Sen, who is his senior both in age and in experience. Mishra then proceeds to give his students additional *prasad* (which is usually a consecrated food offering) in the form of a new *tihai* or rhythmic footwork pattern. The students learn the pattern, receiving the formal blessing of their teacher through the transfer of knowledge. In this context, the dance is a material part of a religious exchange.

The students are clearly at ease with the progression of the Guru Purnima ceremony—they have done this many times before. Marking Guru Purnima is an essential part of training in the classical dance form Kathak in India, where ceremonies can range from humble in-studio affairs like the one at the Bhavan to evening-length programs that involve the offering of full performances to one's guru. Guru Purnima continues to be an essential part of Kathak training at the Bhavan, where nearly half of the participants in the room had never been to India, and few of them considered themselves devout or practicing Hindus.

Guru Purnima is just one example of how Hinduism remains the centering religious tradition at the ostensibly secular Bhavan. Like the state of India itself, the Bhavan maintains a secular, "unity-through-diversity" discourse of Indian culture while in reality promoting art forms that have been Sanskritized, framing essentially Hindu practices like Guru Purnima as

secular and essential to Indian Culture writ large. Nearly all public programs at the Bhavan begin with the director or other administrative leader reciting *shlokas* or verses from Hindu scriptures, and ceremonies like Guru Purnima and Saraswati puja (the worship of Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of the arts and education) are embedded in dance classes.

I would suggest that rather than trying to surreptitiously promote the Hindu religion under the guise of secularism, the Bhavan truly believes that while their *organization* is secular, the *arts* that they teach are inherently and inextricably tied to Hindu beliefs and practices. They are following a line of history in which art forms like Kathak are intertwined with Bhakti worship practices in one incarnation, and reformulated as essentially Hindu storytelling traditions in another incarnation. The impact and relevance of Islamic aesthetic and religious influences on Kathak are largely cut out from the master narrative at the Bhavan. Syncretism is not acknowledged as essential to the formation of Indian Culture. Instead,

> The iconization of Sanskrit heroines (nayikas) and gods and goddesses such as Radha, Shakuntala, Nataraja, Shiva, Durga, Rama, Sita, and others continues to dominate the classical dance repertory. The formal presentation of the classical repertory includes invocations to Lords Krishna, Ganapati, and Vishnu or goddesses Saraswati, Durga, and others to inscribe the performance within the spiritual space of the temple (Chakravorty 2000, 114).

For example, nearly all Kathak performances at the Bhavan begin with a *vandana* or *stuti*, religious invocations of Hindu deities performed as discrete items at the start of a longer Kathak program. These pieces are usually introduced at the mic by the dancer or an emcee, who describes the deity being depicted and confirms the link between Kathak performance and Hindu worship through a normalization of vandana and stuti as part and parcel of contemporary Kathak performance. These religious items were in fact added to Kathak repertoire in the late 20th century by Maya Rao, Nirmala Joshi, and Shambhu Maharaj, as noted by Walker, but "are now

often believed to be part of the 'ancient' Kathak tradition" (Walker 2014, 125). The flexibility of Kathak allowed for these figures to add and subtract material from the repertoire per their tastes and interests, yet efforts to fix the dance to a certain idea of ancient Hindu identity have since obscured that flexible moment in the modern period when the vandana and stuti were intentionally added to Kathak repertoire.

At the Bhavan I witnessed three full-length Kathak solo performances, all of which began with a Hindu religious invocation of some kind. One[200] featured a *guru vandana*, which establishes the guru or teacher as a dispeller of metaphorical darkness, or ignorance—a spiritual figure akin to Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh (Shiva), the major trinity of Hindu gods respectively linked to the creation, sustenance, and dissolution of the universe. Another solo[201] began with a *Ganesh stuti,* or paying obeisance to Ganesh, the god of auspicious beginnings, while the third solo[202] began with a performance of *Shiva Tandav Strotam*, a set of lyrics depicting and paying respect to Shiva as the god of dance (among other things).[203] In all three presentations, Hinduism literally set the stage for the Bhavan's rendering of "traditional" and "authentic" Kathak.

The prominence of the Bhavan in terms of prestige and resources in the Indian arts community in London is such that the Hindu-centric ethos of the institution is rarely called out. Even high-profile Muslim practitioners like the famed Pakistani Kathak dancer Nahid Siddiqui, and critical performance studies scholars like Avanthi Meduri from the University of

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[200] *Mahotsav*. Performance by Kala Sharma, July 11, 2015, Mountbatten Auditorium, London.
[201] *Summer School Showcase Events*. Performance by Amy Patel, August 1, 2015, Mountbatten Auditorium, London.
[202] *Summer School Showcase Events*. Performance by Saswati Sen, August 1, 2015, Mountbatten Auditorium, London.
[203] A sample of lines from the Shiv Tandav Stotra:
"Adoration to the great Lord Shiva who has the brilliant fire burning in his forehead /
which shines even more by the breath of the whirling snake that roams the skies /
to him who dances to the rhythm that pulsates in the potent sounds /
coming forth as *dhimi, dhimi, dhimi, dhimi*, from his auspicious drum, the damaru."
Translation from: Kavitha Kalyan. *Vamsa, Quest for the Divine Calling*. Notion Press, 2016.

Roehampton, play along with the "unity-in-diversity" discourse of the Bhavan that sits on top of transparently Hindu-centered rhetoric. For example, the two participated at the World Dance Day celebration[204] at the Bhavan on May 21, 2017, where Nandakumara began the event

> with a prayer from the Vedas: May we all see with our eyes what is auspicious. May we all hear with our ears what is auspicious. With healthy body, mind, and spirit, may we be able to dedicate ourselves to the cause of humans. May the celestial being shower their choicest blessings on us so we may all develop a sense of sacrifice in our lives. May there be peace, peace, and real peace (observation, May 21, 2017).

After reciting the prayer in English, Nandakumara went on to chant the shloka in Sanskrit. Unlike the English rendering, which Nandakumara read off a piece of paper like lines of a speech, the Sanskrit version was delivered from memory with all the intonations and vigor of Hindu ceremonial chant. While the content of the shloka touches on desires for health, personal development, and peace that are not necessarily Hindu-specific, the fact that Nandakumar felt the need to ground the evening's performance in the specificity of Vedic scripture points toward the Bhavan's investment in an ancient Hindu framing of dance. Later in the same speech, Nandakumar expounds on how dance enables individual expression and collective engagement across cultural boundaries; even in this universalist line of thought, Nandakumara quotes Kalidas, a Sanskrit poet and dramatist who dealt almost exclusively in Hindu mythology.[205] Nandakumar's statements at the World Dance Day event were followed up by Parvati Nair, the Bhavan's office supervisor, who introduced the first performance of the event. It was a *Ganesh*

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[204] As described by Avanthi Meduri at this same event, World Dance Day is an initiative of the International Dance Council, a wing of UNESCO, meant to bring dance into the mainstream of arts education. There were no Kathak performances at this event at the Bhavan, since the Kathak department was just beginning to transition from the leadership of Abhay Shankar Mishra to Nahid Siddiqui. Though no explanation was given, I would infer that Kathak was missing from the program because Siddiqui did not have time to prepare a performance for her students, as she had just joined the Bhavan staff.

[205] While Hindu culture was locally dominant in Kalidas's time, he invokes Hindu figures not only in purely religious terms, but as general cultural icons of the society of that time. In current times Kalidas is often glorified as a classical poet and his Hindu identifications are accentuated.

stuti, another tribute to the god Ganesh. Nair described the piece as "the usual traditional prayer" offered at the beginning of Indian classical performances (ibid). In this short description, Nair encompasses the foundational framework of the Bhavan that equates "usual, traditional" Indian classical performance with Hinduism.

This keen centering of Hinduism and the Indian state was barely tempered by Meduri's brief comments that described World Dance Day as "a way for us all to come together and think about dance as a global activity," or by Siddiqui's momentary self-correction in which she mentioned "Indian dance, or dance from the subcontinent" (ibid). Interestingly, Siddiqui, who was the first Pakistani to ever teach at the Bhavan decades prior and who had recently returned for a brief stint as the Bhavan's Kathak teacher following the previous teacher's departure, reiterated Nandakumara's positioning of the Indian arts as essentially spiritual, highly individual, and open to all. Onstage at World Dance Day she said:

> All these arts are divine arts. And what is divinity? It's what we experience, connected with our soul. Dance is not only physical. Dance extends out from the soul, the center of our core, the center of our being. So all moves that come out are actually extensions of our soul. It's so heartening to bring all this under one roof at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan because our new generation, our children actually, are getting the opportunity to see all the forms and culture (ibid).

Perhaps because of her precarious position as the only Pakistani Muslim on the faculty, Siddiqui found a way to couch her comments in the same language of universality and deep personal relationality that Nandakumara used in describing the Bhavan's role in facilitating flexible experiences of spirituality. Both Siddiqui and Nandakumara framed dance as a metaphysical practice, intimately personal and larger than specific religions or collective identities like "Indian." And it is ironic that Siddiqui speaks of "bringing all under the roof" of the "Bharatiya" Bhavan, when Bharat refers specifically to India and is the term often used by Hindu nationalists

globally to conjure a pre-partition, "unbroken" Indian landscape (*Akhanda Bharat*) that once encompassed modern-day Pakistan and Bangladesh.

This universalist discourse of one "supreme reality"[206] that unites all people through art glosses over the Hindu emphasis of the Bhavan, while lifting the institution up as a site of transcendent self-awareness through the arts. The approach can have a profound effect on the experience of dancers at the Bhavan who do feel impacted by the universalist potential of Kathak. Rabia Fazli, a Pakistan-born Kathak student at the Bhavan, put it this way:

> It is that moment when the curtains are open. When no words are being said. When there is only art, expression, movement, music, and just a story to tell. The brilliance of the moment comes from that is transports me to a whole new world where the audience, they don't need to hear me. Where I don't need to speak anything. Because the audience, they can feel me because I add some joy to them by presenting this art form. Because I believe that art has the power to bring peace, to add joy to someone, to bridge all the gaps, and to add color to life. And that's what we do at Bhavan.[207]

I am suggesting that these universalizing and no doubt deeply felt descriptions of what the Bhavan does—add joy, bridge gaps—is the result of the way the institution deploys a language of flexibility to obscure the actual fixed nature of how they practice and frame Kathak dance. The Bhavan's framing of Kathak is steeped in a belief in the essential[208] nature of the form as transcendent and accessible on the one hand, but also uniquely Indian and inescapably Hindu on the other. This is consistent with the overarching Sanskritization of classical Indian dance during the nationalization period. After all, the Bhavan is an institution dedicated to the *classical* Indian arts; the institution aligns with the main effort of the classicization process to

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[206] "Dr Nandakumara Shares His Experience At The Bhavan." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Bhavan, December 5, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUdfIVGMmhA

[207] "My Brilliant Moment at the Bhavan." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Bhavan, November 8, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rw8OWa0nZKY.

[208] Echoing Partha Chatterjee's point about how postcolonial Indian identity relied in part on a framing of the "East" as essentially spiritual in opposition to the "West" as essentially material, a strategy used to entrench a sense of inalienable Indian identity under postcolonial conditions (Chatterjee 1993).

construct a homogenous "essence of [Indian] culture" ("Dr Nandakumara Shares His Experience At The Bhavan," 2018). Thus, the Bhavan creates and reinforces an image of India that is uncomplicatedly Hindu. The relationship of Kathak to this imagined, essentialized India is circulated and reinforced through the work of "eminent Gurus" born in India, who hold positions of great discursive power in the traditional pedagogic relationships that the Bhavan tries to foster.

Continuity: Guru Shishya Parampara

The other major factor that I would identify as shaping and fixing the practice of Kathak at the Bhavan is the discursive adherence to *guru shishya parampara*, or the teacher-student tradition. In spite of operating on a highly standardized ISTD syllabus that predetermines the first six years of Kathak training as described in the previous chapter, the Bhavan still insists that it upholds traditional Indian modes of pedagogy. In this way the Bhavan partakes in two contradictory discourses—one that invests in mainstream legibility through an adherence to British structures of learning and evaluation, and one that values the personalized transmission of knowledge between guru and shishya.

Guru-shishya parampara consists, in theory, of close, one-on-one training that is considered essential to true classical education. It involves a close bond between a teacher and a student, whose relationship, in the best-case scenario, is marked by complete deference and reverence on the part of the student toward the teacher, and great personal, selfless investment of the teacher in an individual student. Traditionally, the guru and disciple share close quarters—with the disciple often living with the guru and offering respect and care as one would toward a parent. This however, isn't generally the case now, as Anurima Banerji points out:

> While in ancient India the guru–shishya relationship was fostered in an immersive environment—often, but not always, in a residential system known as the *gurukul*, or teacher's abode—where the student served the teacher and in return received specialized knowledge in the arts, the situation has changed in the contemporary world, where the relationship is more professionalized and transactional, with students paying fees to their gurus for access to dance training, performance platforms, and the social respect conferred when one belongs to a noted artistic lineage or community. Yet, while the economic terms of the relationship have shifted, certain values of the prior system residually remain: namely, the assumptions that the student must ideally perform unquestioning obedience while the guru exercises total authority.[209]

The guru shishya relationship also had a spiritual or religious element, in which the guru is positioned as a god of knowledge who blesses the worthy student with his teachings, as demonstrated in the Guru Purnima event at the Bhavan. The guru held the highest social position in ancient Indian hierarchies, perceived as a custodian of sacred forms of knowledge and an intermediary between the divine and earthly worlds. The guru in the arts context passes on the unique knowledge, style, and approach to dance from his or her[210] lineage to the student, who has the responsibility to carry on that specific style of dance. This can include secret or esoteric knowledge about Kathak such as compositions that have been passed down for generations, original poetry, or unique movements or flourishes that are special to particular lineage.

In this system, imitation of the guru is more desirable than creative interpretation or individualized improvisation; indeed, "intricacies of the art form were traditionally taught through imitation of the master, with technique ingrained into muscle memory by rote repetition through daily practice (riyaaz). Perpetuation of the subtleties of style and compositions passed

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[209] Banerji, Anurima, Anusha Kedhar, Royona Mitra, Janet O'Shea, and Shanti Pillai. "Postcolonial Pedagogies: Recasting the Guru-Shishya Parampara." *Theater Topics* 27.3 (2017): 221-230.

[210] It is important to note that the guru-shishya system is historically patriarchal and patrilineal (Chakravorty, 2006, 2008). Women specialists who performed as tawaifs and courtesans were purposefully sidelined by an Indian state that promoted hereditary gharanas of male practitioners who were hailed as the keepers of knowledge and tradition that was passed down through the male line. Work by Chakravorty, Prickett, Walker, and many others have shown how women practitioners have in fact now taken the lead in terms of learning, practicing, and sharing Kathak all over the globe. Even in hereditary lines like that of the Maharaj family of the Lucknow gharana, non-hereditary female practitioners (Saswati Sen, in this example) have risen to the level of senior disciple and even heir to the lineage.

down through generations was ensured by exact imitation."[211] Riyaaz in the guru-shishya system enables fixity through the practice of emulation—riyaaz is the means through which the guru-shishya parampara is enacted as "implicit social contract as well as customary law, setting up a system of rewards for performing normatively and penalties for perceived transgressions, organizing the boundaries of what is morally and aesthetically permissible for the student" (Banerji et al, 2017, 222). This complicates the potential of riyaaz as a flexible site of sensory immersion and transcendence of self as described in the previous chapter.

As Kathak dancer Munna Shukla told scholar Stacey Prickett, "the guru's values and beliefs are transmitted along with the steps," (Prickett 2007, 27). The other half of that transmission is the shishya or disciple's inherent responsibility to protect and preserve the knowledge they have been given. This, in theory, brings the guru and the shishya in close cooperation and mutual investment in one another. When it happens in reality, the guru-shishya bond can be a special and rewarding mentor-mentee affiliation. According to Shovana Narayan, "in the guru-shishya relationship, the thread is not only incumbent on passing the technical skill, but also the spiritual, the spirit of the dance and the spirit of life and living through the world of dance" (quoted in Prickett 2007, 30).

That is what Bhavan Kathak student Dhiya Arora feels about her Kathak guru Abhay Shankar Mishra, who was head of the Kathak department at the Bhavan when she joined more than ten years ago. Arora's first experiences with Kathak aren't compelling in her memory, but what resonates with her as the first memorable experience with the dance is the first set of one-on-one classes she had with her Guru in her second year of training. Before that Arora had been part of a 15-person beginner class. It was when she began a more traditional guru-shishya style

[211] Prickett, Stacey. "Guru or teacher? Shishya or student? Pedagogic shifts in South Asian dance training in India and Britain." *South Asia Research* 27.1 (2007): 25-41. Pg. 29.

of training in addition to attending syllabus-oriented classes that she felt something important and exciting was unfolding. “It was an opening of a relationship,” Arora said. She went on to describe how her Kathak dance experience in its entirety rests on her relationship with her guru:

> For me, I take the teacher-student relationship quite seriously. I did my best to be a good student. I think the relationship with the guru grows, and I am all for the guru-shishya parampara. I feel that is a necessity in any art form. ‘Mentor’ is not enough. ‘Teacher’ is not enough. Yes, that’s what we call them, but for me it’s just a feeling you carry using that word ‘guru.’ I had options to learn from other people. But for me it just doesn’t sit right to go to anyone else. Not because I can’t, but right now I get so much from my own guru anyway, in a way that I comprehend, that gels with me, that I believe is his best ability to be true to his art form. So I don’t feel I need to go anywhere else. There are so many lovely gurus out there I’m sure. But for me I’ve got one guru in Kathak [...] whoever I’ve learned from thereafter is someone I’ve been exposed to because of [my guru’s] blessing. For me, the world of Kathak wouldn’t have been created without my Guruji. Everything, every exposure I’ve had, is through this analogy he’s created in my life. (Arora, interview with author, 2017).

Mishra presided over Arora’s rang manch pravesh, or solo debut performance, which is meant to mark a Kathak dancer’s public entry into the professional world, indicating her readiness as a stage performer after sustained training (or at least indicating her serious dedication to the form and attainment of considerable aesthetic expertise, even if she doesn't harbor professional ambitions). Even when Mishra left his position at the Bhavan to return to India, Arora made journeys to the subcontinent to continue her training. Their relationship had to change over the years out of necessity, as their physical distance grew and Dhiya entered a transition period between being solely a Kathak student and perhaps something else. “My Guruji is in my mind now, my Guruji is in my heart, in my gut,” Arora said, conveying her devotion to him and the form.

Arora states that she will always remain attached to the legacy of her guru, even if she were to flourish in an independent dance career. The relationship is not transactional or compartmentalized to the training phase. Rather, Kathak as an art and as a feature of her life is

essentially fixed to her guru. Arora's link with her guru cannot be divorced from the context of learning Kathak in the U.K.; indeed, I would argue that the guru bond has an even stronger pull for students like Dhiya who engage with Kathak in an environment where the dance has a marginal status. Mishra himself has noted how his students in the U.K. "come here for once a week, twice a week, but then they are so focused that they learn [snaps fingers] quickly. In India, people take [it] for granted. Because they are thinking like, 'It is our dance.'"[212] Mishra suggested that students in the U.K. are more likely to appreciate their Kathak practice and what it means, and therefore approach guru-shishya relationships with greater intention and commitment: "for them, it is much more deep. They value even small small things" (Mishra, interview with the author, 2015). He went on to describe how his goal as a teacher is for his students to perform and receive good reviews in which he is recognized as the guru, completing the reciprocal circle of the training process as it was intended in traditional framings of guru-shishya relationships (ibid).

In the time since our interviews, Mishra left the Bhavan to return to India and Arora has gone on to become one of the two teaching artists at the Bhavan's Kathak department, along with her guru-sister[213] Deepika Kathrani. Kathrani's first encounter with Kathak is also strongly colored with memories of Mishra, her guru. She told me how when she first visited the Kathak class at the Bhavan just to see if it was something she wanted to learn, Mishra gave her his number on a slip of paper so she could contact him about beginner classes and signed it "Guruji." Seeing that word addressed to her was momentous for Kathrani:

> I was so drawn to it that for the next couple of days at uni, before I even rang him, before I even attended class, before I had done anything, I was going around saying to people 'yeah I learn Kathak and this is my Guruji.' I loved the fact that he wrote 'Guruji'

[212] Abhay Shankar Mishra. Personal interview. August 13, 2015

[213] Guru-sister or guru-brother refers to someone who learned under the same guru, usually in the same peer group, and refers to the deep sense of kinship produced by adherence to the same style.

> because it was so traditional, and it was just so different from my normal life that I had a Guru (Kathrani, interview with the author, 2017).

From then on, both Arora and Kathrani, who were batch-mates at the Bhavan, were fully invested in Mishra as a teacher, and Mishra was invested in them as students. Both women went through the full Kathak curriculum at the Bhavan, performed in most Bhavan shows, and completed their milestone rang manch pravesh performance under Mishra's guidance.

Arora and Kathrani represent ideal shishyas or disciples in the Bhavan's value system. Their relationship to Kathak is irreversibly tied to their relationship to their guru, and they have both demonstrated the kind of institutional loyalty that is expected of students in the traditional guru-shishya model. This also made them ideal candidates for teaching positions at the Bhavan once Mishra left—by hiring Arora and Kathrani, the Bhavan acted upon their value for the guru-shishya system and lifted up the students who adhered to that system. However, the Bhavan's website[214] does not describe Kathrani and Arora as gurus. Indeed, none of the female dance faculty currently at the Bhavan are described as gurus on their webpages. Only Prakash Yadaggude, the only male dance instructor currently at the Bhavan, is labeled as a guru on the website.

What the Bhavan's criteria is for the title of 'guru' in terms of accomplishment is unclear, but I would suggest it depends at least in part on the perceived "authenticity" of having been trained in India, and therefore the homeland or origin point of Kathak. The language used to describe teachers at the Bhavan and to talk about quality of training is distinctly marked by a value for Indian dance lineage and history as an implicit indicator of quality. Further, the guru figure is also generally constructed and understood in normative terms as male, making the female guru a notable exception. Gurus and visiting artists are described as "great masters from

[214] "Kathak." *Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan*, https://bhavan.net/kathak/. Accessed on February 24, 2019.

India" and always introduced with their full honorary titles from the Indian government (including references to high-level civilian awards like the "Padma Vibhushan," and "Bharat Ratna") at performances and public events. The mere fact that a teacher or a guest performer is from India is often mentioned to insinuate a high quality of dance that sometimes does not accurately reflect the dancer's actual ability. Connections to the great dance lineages of India, however thin, were touted as proof of "traditional" and "authentic" training.[215] The Bhavan even offers an annual summer school solely for the purpose of importing teachers from India and offering what the Bhavan considers incomparable exposure to authentic classical practice in the form of these "eminent gurus" who come straight from the source. These values have been used to market the Bhavan as a desirable place to learn Indian dance. While dancers like Arora and Kathrani are indeed continuing the legacy of "authentic" training under one of the Bhavan-approved masters from India, there is an apparent disconnect between acknowledging the quality of their training and the fact that they are entirely trained in Britain. There is no making up for not being direct from the motherland.

It is important to note that the idea that Kathak dance is transmitted only through the guru-shishya parampara in India is outdated. For decades now, Kathak has been taught at prestigious universities and state-sponsored dance institutions through a "dance education" framework. Prickett describes the difference: "dance education pedagogies have been shaped by decades of academic inquiry into diverse aspects of learning, aiming at a holistic understanding of art and its place in society. The intellectualisation of processes is evident in the split between

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theory and practice at the university level, where dance theory lecturers rarely teach practical classes" (2007, 35). Students in these environments can reach up to MA and PhD level degrees in Kathak while studying under many different professors. Despite these large-scale dance education schemes that expose students to structured learning led by many teachers, the discourse of guru-shishya parampara as the foundation of classical dance education persists.

For those Bhavan students who did not retain close personal and professional bonds with Mishra or approved Indian connections, their Kathak life at the Bhavan was stifling. It is clear from their testimony[216] that while there may have been a very narrow path to successful professionalization under strict adherence to the guru-shishya parampara as demonstrated by the trajectories of Arora and Kathrani, the Bhavan's allegiance to such a traditional training system leaves little room for growth beyond the purview of the guru. Standard class sizes range from 10 to 15 students, and only a small minority of those students even achieve a close relationship with the teacher. If a student is not interested in the traditional rang manch pravesh debut solo, which usually involves at least six months of one-on-one training and live music accompaniment, then the guru has little reason to invest in that student. This is also a financial issue; the rang manch training process can be very expensive for students who are expected to pay for a year of private lessons as well as pay for the fees of accompanying musicians and theater costs. Without the rang manch, the guru loses on opportunities for both financial capital and social capital that would be gained through the promotion of their work via the student's milestone performance. For these students who do not form close bonds with their guru, the Bhavan and the teacher are simply administrators of a standardized ISTD syllabus. Indeed, one important complication in the Bhavan's adherence to guru-shishya parampara is their simultaneous implementation of a

[216] The four Kathak students and former students who discussed the limits of the Bhavan model requested anonymity.

fixed Kathak curriculum under the ISTD that remains standard to all Kathak classes. Such standardization flies in the face of the gharana-based transfer of esoteric knowledge that the guru-shishya parampara is based on, yet the relevance of the guru-shishya systems is still fundamental to the Bhavan's enactment of heritage-model Kathak.

Many students who remain committed to Kathak but not to a particular guru take advantage of the vast opportunities for training in London with other Kathak teachers (some of whom shun the 'guru' title as a political statement), or through workshops with visiting artists from around the globe. The standardized ISTD syllabus enables this mobility between teachers and institutions who are all familiar with a common script. While the Bhavan is the oldest and the largest Kathak dance organization in London, there are myriad other opportunities to learn and perform Kathak in the city and the wider U.K. (some of which I will outline in the next chapter). To receive funding for original work and to gain diverse, high-visibility performance prospects, it is more strategic to affiliate with many teachers and institutions rather than remain bound to one. In this changing landscape, the Bhavan has chosen to double down on their version of "authentic" teaching based in the traditional pedagogy of guru-shishya parampara, even if a true guru-shishya bond only exists for a minority of the Bhavan's students. The result of this kind of discursive fixation on lineage goes in two directions: many students flock to the Bhavan precisely for what they perceive as truly traditional learning straight from India, and many students leave the Bhavan to escape the "bubble."

In terms of the actual practice of Kathak, the guru-shishya parampara sometimes has the effect of limiting the flexible potential of improvisation and creative interpretation in favor of recreating the movements of the guru, the guru's choreography, and the guru's interpretations. The role of the shishya in this relationship is primarily to re-create, not create. Such recreation is

couched in a language of preservation, continuity, and authenticity that ultimately stifles individual expression and exploration. In the guru-shishya mode of transmission,

> "not a lot of time is spent […] in describing the maneuvering of the body in technique. The system perpetuates itself because of the particular mode of training whereby the students learn by imitating the teacher's demonstrations exactly. Usually the students stand behind the teacher as she or he demonstrates movements—either facing the students or facing front—and the students endeavor to reproduce these exact images intuitively. Explanations are brief except the case of abhinaya pieces and apart from corrections: the learning thus happens almost exclusively through visual channels—through direct visual transmission of material. Another corollary is that the dancer never learns to think in terms of muscularity, weight shift, energy manipulation, or finding her or his center […] several of the dancers I talked to agreed that while these technical details are rarely discussed in training, realizations about them generally dawn upon the dance student who has immersed herself in the training-in the nature of an epiphany understood by the body-and remain implicit in her knowledge about the technique."[217]

What this model of learning suggests is that fixity is maintained through the imitation of the guru and replication of his movements—there is little space for critical interrogation of movement principles or for an open dialogue between student and teacher. The transmission of knowledge is unidirectional, and deeper understandings about form and aesthetics emerge from the student's own reflections and private realizations (which also signal the full investment of the ideal shishya).

The guru-shishya parampara positions flexibility and individuality in the art form as dichotomous with authentic Indian heritage and traditional ways of learning. Even Arora, who has been in a rewarding traditional guru-shishya relationship with her teacher, says she still doesn't identify as a senior dancer even after ten years of training. She is just now starting to flex her creative muscle in the physical absence of her guru, trying to locate herself in her dance practice:

> Now [...] it's important for me to know why I know something. It's not just a case of 'Oh, I've learned it from him'. It's a case of 'Why do I know this, how can I better it if I can,

[217] Chatterjea, Ananya. "Training in Indian classical dance: A case study." *Asian theatre journal* (1996): 68-91.

> or add to it. What can I offer back?' For me I feel like I'm at that stage of my life where I'm getting that capacity to give back. I'm not quite there yet. But that idea is budding in me in how I want to give back, how I want to take it forward. If Guruji is my tree and I am his branch, how do I want to flourish while still being connected? I don't ever want to be disconnected from the trunk, that would be a tragedy (Arora, interview with the author, 2017).

Arora is currently at the edge of where the tree trunk becomes a branch—where the fixed nature of her dance practice under the auspices of her guru is coming into contact with her personal voice, desires, and aspirations for her practice. Getting in touch with what she wants to do with her Kathak practice is an introspective experimentation with a kind of flexibility she is only now allowing herself to test.

Kathak as Embedded in an Affective Regime

Just as the practice of dance and music at the Bhavan is imbued with Hinduism, it is also comprised of what Mankekar calls "affective intensities." Mankekar's formulation of affect does not refer to precognitive interior emotions or emotional responses. She argues that "affect cannot be solely located in an individual subject, nor can it be relegated to the psyche or to subjective feelings. Subjects are not where affect originates; rather, affect produces subjects through the traces it leaves on them [...] subjects and objects function as nodes in the circulation of affect" (Mankekar 2015, 13).[218] I am interested in how the Bhavan circulates certain affective intensities relating to their imagination of India and Indian Culture through Kathak practice. I apply Mankekar's methodology of attending to "everyday practices, corporeal intensities, and shifts in tone" to the practice of Kathak at the Bhavan to trace the work of a heritage-oriented regime of affect on diasporic Indian subjects (Mankekar 2015, 5). This regime of affect both produces a

[218] Mankekar is building off the work of Sara Ahmed and others who have argued that "affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced as an effect of its circulation" (Ahmed 2004, 45).

certain kind of imagined India and fixes the practice of Kathak dance to that image. As Mankekar describes, the deployment of "terms like affective investment, affective regimes, affective value, and affective circulation is intended to foreground the material and institutional aspects of affect: affects are neither free floating nor unmoored from the socio-historical conjunctures of which they are part" (Mankekar 2015, 14). In my study, Bhavan is a key site for the circulation of an affective regime of Indian heritage that is centered on the inalienability of Indian classical music and dance to Indian Culture. Other key nodes include the Indian state, mass media, Indian diasporic subjects, their home lives and social practices, and countless other objects and subjects that affect circulates between.

Bhavan student and now teacher Deepika Kathrani first decided to explore Indian classical dance because she was inspired by a Bharatanatyam performance she happened to see. She

> liked the idea of being a classical dancer, the idea of doing classical. It was so niche, and that's what I liked about it. I liked the idea of wearing bells around my ankles, I liked the idea of doing the costumes and stuff, that's what appealed to me. At the time I didn't know what it represented so it was just aesthetics. It was the makeup, the huge hair, the costumes. You would never look like that otherwise. I really took to that whole traditional root and wanted to explore it (Kathrani, interview with the author, 2017).

Kathrani is self-aware of her investment in the *idea* of Indian classical dance and its discursive connections to traditionality and inalienable Indian identity. She understands how the affective intensities of things like costumes, makeup, and labels like "classical" are "about the capacity to navigate the world, about world-making" (Mankekar 2015, 17). These affective objects and discourses produce and circulate a phantasm of India, one that Kathrani is primed for. Coming from a family of Gujarati Indians who migrated to the U.K. from Uganda, Kathrani had little meaningful relationship with India as a real place of encounter. She has no family there, and will only make trips to India for shopping and touring. She identifies as a British-Indian, which she

calls "a race of its own," and felt distinctly apart from her British-Indian friends who found cultural identification through Indian movies or popular culture. As she searched for some connection to India that spoke to her, classical dance and music rose to the forefront. Describing her first visit to the Bhavan, Kathrani said:

> "I like the environment, I liked that there were tablas placed around there, sitars placed around there. The more traditional it was the more it appealed to me because it was such a novelty. It was so different from everything else that was in my life, it was this other place. Maybe if it was more modern and contemporary it wouldn't have appealed to me as much" (Kathrani, interview with the author, 2017).

Kathrani's description brings up the nature of temporality embedded in the circulation of affect at the Bhavan. The presence of affective objects like the tabla and sitar are tied to a time and place that are neither "modern" nor "contemporary" in Kathrani's estimation, despite being very much part of life in the present. She echoes the Bhavan's institutional rhetoric that frames the Indian classical arts, instruments, dances, and traditions as first and foremost "age-old" and "time-honored."[219] The self-described "vision" of the Bhavan as stated on its website is replete with affective imagery that captured Kathrani's imagination in real life: "Walking down The Bhavan's corridors one might pass by classrooms full of racks of tabla, mridangam, rows of sitars or vinas, and hear the rhythmic percussion of ankle-bells, from the feet of those training to be classical dancers. On entering a music classroom one might well feel transported to a gurukul in India" (ibid). Central to this image of the Bhavan is a displacement of temporality and a displacement of geography. The Bhavan aims to blur the lines between U.K. and India, between the present and the past, by creating a space in which affective intensities transport Indian diasporic subjects to a different (and constructed) time and place.

[219] "Mission." *Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan,* https://www.bhavan.net/mission. Accessed March 1, 2019.

Kathrani was distinctly transported when she first peeked through a window to observe the Kathak class at the Bhavan:

> It was Tuesday evening, which meant the advanced class was on [...] and there was a class full of people, loud ghungroo, really really loud music. I remember looking through the window and seeing Guruji sitting there with a huge tabla, and he was just blasting away at the tabla [...] and I literally ended up watching that class for literally an hour and a half, and I don't know where time went. I stood there for one hour and a half looking through that little window, just fascinated. It was like looking at another world (Kathrani, interview with the author, 2017).

The construction of this "other world" and Kathrani's visceral connection to it is not random. The Bhavan is simply continuing a long-existing project of constructing and projecting a conception of Indian classical arts as symbols of Indian national culture from another time and place. What is key to my study is the fact that the Bhavan is committed to the Indian nationalist project in the context of the U.K. They embody the heritage model of identity formation by offering nationalist conceptions of Indian culture rooted in the past and self-consciously separate from British national culture and Indian popular culture.

These conceptions of identity are often tied to affective objects like the bells, musical instruments, and costumes that so moved Kathrani. Another Bhavan dancer, Deepa Trivedi, told me of how her practice of Kathak dance has led her to wear kurtas (long tunics that are customary garb in India and commonly worn during dance practice), which she said in turn led her to feel more Indian in the process.[220] The kurta was an affective object loaded with Indian identification for Trivedi—the connection between the two was charged and uncomplicated. Similarly, Arora relates the feeling of wearing lehengas as part of her Kathak performances to feelings of simplicity, her Punjabi childhood, and the "beauty of Indian culture" (Arora, interview with the author, 2017). But conceptions of Indian identity are also tied to practices like

[220] Deepa Trivedi. Personal interview. August 1, 2015.

the Guru Purnima ceremony I described earlier in this chapter, practices that are embedded with discourses of respect, rigor, spirituality, and discipline. Kathak dance is surrounded by and constituted by these affective objects and practices. The transfer of knowledge from guru to shishya, the ritualized gestures of respect, and the discipline of riyaaz are all coated in affective intensities related to morality, propriety, and commitment that have come to define "authentic" Indian culture.

To see how these affective intensities weave in and out of life at the Bhavan, let us immerse ourselves for a moment in an imagined day in the life of a Kathak student at the Bhavan:[221]

After getting off from work, the Kathak student takes the underground during rush hour to make it to the Bhavan in time for class. Exiting at the West Kensington station, she passes The Famous Three Kings pub, where rowdy men are spilling out onto the sidewalk clutching beers and swearing at TVs blasting the latest football match. Turning onto Castletown Road, the scene changes. She's in a quiet residential neighborhood where the only commotion is the small handful of people, Indian like her, milling around on the sidewalk in front of the Bhavan's inconspicuous entrance. She walks inside, and immediately puts her hands together in a namaskar, bowing her head to greet the two elder women who sit behind the reception desk in immaculately pressed and pinned saris. She goes down a narrow staircase towards the ladies' bathroom, where she tears off her black blazer and matching pencil skirt. Colorfully patterned fabrics pour out of her gym bag, and she shuffles through them to find a kurta top of modest length and some matching leggings. In the small wooden bathroom stall, she swirls a colorful 5-foot-long dupatta, or scarf, around her shoulder and waist, tying in in place to cover her breasts.

[221] The following passage is informed by my interviews with students and my participant-observation research at the Bhavan between 2015 and 2017.

Her hair goes up in a braid, her fringe is pinned back, and her big earrings come off. She emerges from the bathroom the picture of tayaari *(readiness).*[222]

She goes down the hallway to the Kathak classroom. She takes of her shoes, lining them up against the wall with the others. Opening the door, she immediately bends down to the ground to touch her hands to the studio floor. She brings her fingertips back up to touch her forehead and then her heart, paying respect to and receiving a blessing from the sacred space. She then makes a beeline for her guru, seated in a chair at the front of the class. She crouches down to touch his feet with both hands, bringing her hands back up to her head and heart. He lifts his right hand to her, offering her a blessing and greeting in exchange. She sits down and opens her bag, drawing out her ghungroo. She gingerly untangles the mess of graying string and discolored brass, making little noise. Placing the bell bundles on the ground, she once again reaches down with her fingertips, touches the ghungroo, and brings her fingers back to her head and heart. Another blessing.

Everyone is ready to go, dressed in a rainbow of color. She stands up and joins her classmates in the middle of the room. Their guru starts explaining a new rhythmic composition, and they all dutifully follow along, clapping out the taal on their hands. The cycle repeats and repeats, dha dhin dhin dha, dha dhin dhin dha. The rhythmic language of bols takes precedence over words. The guru begins to dance, and the women follow along, repeating his every gesture, their eyes fixed on his body, consuming his movements, his style, his distinct touches. At this moment, the dance on his body is the center of their world. Every new movement is a treat, a gift, an opportunity.

[222] In many classrooms *tayaari* is considered one of three pillars of good dance practice. Tayaari refers to the readiness to dance and the preparation that goes into practice and performance; *layakari* refers to the mastery of rhythm, and *khoobsurti* refers to the beauty of execution.

Today they are embodying Shiva, the god of dance and dissolution. They are asked to show his hair flowing like water from the Ganges River, the moon itself tucked away inside his locks. They must perform vastness and power. Dancing a rhythmic composition, the guru commands, "Stronger! Tandav!" The student's mind races, thinking about how she can project the strength and vigor of Shiva through her frame. She must rely on imagination, since nothing in her daily life speaks to this kind of madness, power, bliss. She thinks of paintings of Shiva, the stoic Nataraja statue on her dresser at home, the stories of Shiva's power and triumphs she grew up hearing as a child. The pounding of her feet becomes the sound of Shiva's drum. The exercise takes her far away from London, and she is encouraged to go to that other place. But more than anything, she tries to capture her guru's movements, connecting his steps with Shiva himself.

Strains of sitar float into the room from the class upstairs. The resonant thrumming of tablas continues gently in the background. Time is a blur and suddenly the hour is up. Class is over. All the students rush for the guru's feet again, seeking blessings once more. They settle down around the perimeter of the room, drinking water, opening their hair, taking off their bells. Exiting the room, the Kathak student picks out her shoes from what is now a jumble of footwear. She goes upstairs, where the smell of lentil soup and frying oil is wafting in from the canteen. She follows the smell to a small buffet of simple homestyle food: daal-chawal-roti-sabji. She packs one roti full of mixed vegetables and rolls it up for the train ride home. Her nails turn a faint shade of yellow from the turmeric. A few more bowing namaskars to elders milling around, and she is out the door.

Outside, the cold air suddenly singes her ears even though her body is still warm. She zips up her parka and pulls the hood on, erasing the lightness and brightness of her dancewear underneath. Back through the neighborhood of faux-Georgian fronts, back to the pub where the

game is still raging and the beer is still flowing. Back through the turnstiles, back on the train, back in the darkness of the tunnels.

This brief account is riddled with moments of affect intensity that load daily experiences with meaning. Much of what I've illustrated speaks to what Royona Mitra has described as the constant presence of "the strictly observed hierarchical codes of interaction between [gurus] and [dancers]; our costuming while in training, in *churidars*, *kurtas*, and *dupattas* (Indian leggings, tunics, and scarves); and the transmission systems for danced knowledge, clearly signposted by [gurus] delivering a sequence that we would then emulate as closely as possible" (Banerji et al, 2017, 223). The sight and feel of colorful fabrics associated with India stand apart from London's winter grays; the sounds of classical music are tied to notions of refinement and high culture; the smell, color, texture, taste of food reminds one of what a proper, home-cooked Indian meal is supposed to be like.

All of it forms an oasis of difference and authenticity for Indian diasporic subjects in London. The clothes, music, and food are all nodes through which heritage-model affect circulates, and the diasporic Indian dancers who go to the Bhavan are primed to tap into those affective charges. Most importantly, the enacted rituals of respect, the painstaking imitation of the guru, and the combined work of the imagination and the body to reproduce phantasmic images of Hindu tropes like dancing Shiva recreates Kathak dance as an affective practice that produces a "charged and hegemonic way of being" (Shih 2005, 99). The hegemonic way of being in this case refers to an embodiment of a singular, Hindu, pan-Indian identity that is consciously distinct from British daily life, but it also colored by notions of propriety and

femininity that are aligned with essential Indianness.[223] In other words, practicing Kathak at the Bhavan is also an engagement with heritage-model politics of identity that works at the level of affect through sensorial input, selective memory, and imagination.

In this section I have argued that at the Bhavan, Kathak dance is purposefully fixed within an affective regime that circulates a particular set of identifications related to an imagined India that is centered around the past and that stands in contrast to British culture and Indian popular culture. Structures of affect, whether they manifest in sensory experiences like the smell of incense or in discourses like the respect for gurus, draw in many Indian diasporic subjects who invest their "affective allegiance to the purported core values of 'Indianness'" through their involvement with the Bhavan (Mankekar 2015, 69).

SECTION III: Transnational Lineage at the Leela Institute for the Arts

I follow up the study of the Bhavan with a look at an institution that strategically fixes Kathak dance *and* capitalizes on its flexibility. In this section I introduce the Leela Institute for the Arts, an Indian classical music and dance institution based in Los Angeles that focuses primarily on the training and performance of Kathak. The Institute is comprised of the professional performance company known as the Leela Dance Collective, the dance and music school known as the Leela Academy, and the development wing known as the Leela

[223] In her work outlining the "cerebrality" of the Indian classical dance, Royona Mitra has identified some of the ways in which "the social conditioning of postcolonial Christian values governs the physical reality of every Indian dancer" to produce "pure," and asexual female bodies (Mitra 2005, 172). Similar to my discussion of Kathak's position in an affective regime, Mitra's theory of cerebrality shows how discourses and values around femininity alter or script female corporeality in the context of Indian classical dance practice. She illustrates how the combined work of discourse and training create certain types of body realities by juxtaposing her classical dance training with her exposure to Western contact improv and physical theater and the changes in her own cerebrality that resulted (Mitra 2005).

Endowment. While I will refer to the three different branches of the organization, I use "Leela" or "the Leela Institute" to talk about the organization as a whole.

While Leela is similar to the Bhavan in the way it strategically employs a language of cultural preservation and aligns Kathak with Hindu practice, here I wish to explore one way the Institute fixes Kathak dance that differs from the Bhavan. For the remainder of this chapter I will look at how Leela's deep investment in the legacy of guru Chitresh Das uniquely fixes Kathak dance to a diasporic icon who represents Kathak's flexibility. What is significant in this section is the way Leela adheres to the same heritage model logic of fixity and differentiation that the Bhavan operates on, but applies that logic to a different reference point. As I will show, Leela is less invested in connections to a phantasmic India as the source of essential cultural knowledge and more invested in the singular legacy of one Guru who has made his home outside of India. What is similar between both Leela and the Bhavan is their reification of the past through essential ties to lineage. In the next chapter I will look at how, despite an ardent commitment to lineage, Leela is also making conscious strides to weave Kathak into the larger cultural fabric of Los Angeles in ways that utilize Kathak's flexible potential.

Chitresh Das and the 'California Gharana'

Rather than demonstrating difference from the larger American public by placing value in connections to the Indian nation, dancers at Leela place value first and foremost in connections to their diasporic guru: the late Chitresh Das, a man whose identity as a Kathak dancer and teacher is defined by his life outside of India. I argue that Leela doesn't necessarily fix Kathak in terms of Indian nationhood and Indian Culture in the broad way that the Bhavan does; rather, they are much more pointed in fixing Kathak to the lineage of their guru and only their guru (as

opposed to "gurus" in general). To understand the trajectory of the Leela Institute, one must understand the history of its iconic guru.

Chitresh Das was born in Kolkata, India, to artist parents. He began his dance training at his family's academy and eventually came to the United States in 1970 to teach Kathak at universities. He settled in the San Francisco bay area in 1979, where he founded his dance school and company (known as the Chhandam School and the Chitresh Das Dance Company) while he taught dance at San Francisco State University. Chhandam is now the largest Kathak dance institution in North America, with several sister schools (like the Leela Academy) scattered across the U.S. and Canada. The Chitresh Das Dance Company was one of the most visible Kathak dance groups in the U.S., and while it is now essentially disbanded, members of that company still perform together at high-profile venues under other names (such as the Leela Dance Collective).

Before his passing in 2015, Das performed internationally but was consistently based out of his new home in the U.S. Though Das often taught and performed in India (the Chhandam School has two branches in India), his brand of Kathak grew and flourished primarily in the United States. Leela co-founder Rina Mehta explained that in the diffuse Indian classical dance landscape of the 1970s, Das was on his own: "The thing is, Guruji moved here in 1970, and he was so removed from India, and the politics of India. And he had to make a livelihood at this," Mehta said.[224] "He's been in Marin, California, since 1971. And he's had to think, 'How do I create a show that will get booked by a major venue? It's not going to be a traditional Kathak solo, let me tell you. I have to adapt, I have to evolve (my art form)' […] So much of what he created and what he did was formed by his surroundings, which was California" (Mehta,

[224] Rina Mehta. Personal interview. August 20, 2018.

interview with the author, 2018). Inspired by the figure skaters he saw on American television, for example, Das created a new kind of Kathak spin that he called "the California chakkar" (ibid). Mehta, who began her training with Das as a student at UC Berkeley, remembers his creative style: "He was really innovative. He had us do all kinds of movements that were not Kathak movements. Yes, we're doing them in taal […] but he was really avant-garde and experimental as far as the actual technique of the dance" (ibid).

Das exercised all the flexibility inherent in the Kathak form. He improvised rhythms and movements in response to artists around him, notably tabla accompanists and tap dancers like long-time collaborator Jason Samuels Smith. Das had a competitive and comedic spirit on stage, always dancing in response to the audience or to his collaborators. Mehta described some of these influences:

> "When (Das) started dancing with Jason, he started doing all kinds of things with his feet. Even his early development in the 70s and 80s was heavily influenced by […] tabla. So, he would watch like, 'What are they doing with their fingers on the tabla? How can they do just one finger? If they can do just one finger, I should be able to do one toe.' He was really open to his surroundings and incorporating his surroundings into the dance" (ibid).

Das applied the tenet of creative interpretation to both abstract rhythm movement and narratives in his dance, interpreting them through the unique lens of his life in America and the clearest points of access for audience and collaborators. Das also immersed himself in a meditative but physically demanding style of riyaaz that became famous as "Kathak yoga," in which he simultaneously adhered to a strict rhythmic discipline while centering individual improvisation and expression within a highly accessible logic of mathematics.

What resulted was a style of Kathak that did not fall neatly into any existing gharana or lineage. Das stretched and molded his dance into something completely new, unlike other early Kathak dancers in the U.S. like Anjani Ambegaokar and many others who chose to dedicate their

practice to preserving the style of dance they had imbibed in India. An arts administrator described Das' dance as the "California gharana" of Kathak, and the name stuck. Mehta remembers realizing just how deep this difference between Das' Kathak was from other styles:

> "His style is different, it just looks different. I went to watch a couple of Kathak class in India […] I was like, wow. The way we hold our bodies is different. And I was trying to think about why and I realized that we hold our bodies the way we need to [in order] to produce the movement that our teacher asked us to do. He asked us to do all these movements that those other Kathak dancers are not doing. Like, he demanded so much power out of our feet that literally our center of gravity is just lower" (ibid).

Among some of the differences between Das' non-normative Kathak and more recognizable styles of Kathak is the lower center of gravity that Mehta mentions, which results in knees that are bent much further than normal. Das' footwork utilizes more full-foot tapping for vigorous sound, as opposed to use of the heels and toes to produce softer sounds. Chakkars, or spins, take great precedent in Das' choreographies over other kinds of movements—there is greater variety and application of spins and less variety of other nritta movements and postures. Abhinaya in Das' practice is flamboyant and theatrical, often incorporating footwork and spins to intensify what are usually moments for subtle and nuanced portrayals of emotion.

For example, in rendering a thumri at his performance of *India Jazz Suites: Fastest Feet in Rhythm*[225] at the Grand Performances series in downtown Los Angeles in September 2014, Das portrayed an encounter between the playful god Krishna and his lover Radha. Krishna breaks Radha's water pot, dousing her in water and causing her to clutch at her now-transparent clothing in shame and anger. Usually depicted with great delicacy in the Lucknow gharana,[226]

[225] In Chapter 3 I will take a closer look at the *India Jazz Suites* production and its use of Kathak's flexible properties.

[226] Das and his students claim affiliation with the Lucknow gharana of Kathak, but the trademark elements of gentle movement and nuanced storytelling are missing from their Kathak practice, supporting Walker's theory that gharanas are more brand identities than actual categories of style (Walker 2014, 32). Das' affiliation with the Lucknow gharana is contested among other dancers who claim he is simply trying to align himself with the dominant gharanas as part of a marketing strategy.

with dancers balancing Radha's feelings of shame, excitement, anger, and amusement against Krishna's delight and contrition, Das instead portrayed a shocked Radha comedic exaggeration. His gaping mouth and bulging eyes simplified Radha's storyline but drew laughs from the audience.

The elements of Das' dance I have outlined above were developed over the decades of his life spent the U.S. The heavy-handed expressions, vigorous rhythmic work, and dazzling use of spins speak to an audience that responds to athleticism, theatricality, and power. The nuances of Kathak do not translate as easily to mixed audiences, so Das drew out the elements that did translate. One unique aspect of his Kathak practice was the use of instruments and the engagement with singing by the dancer during performance. In many of Das' works, he and his dancers play instruments and sing *while* they dance, something that is unheard of in traditional Kathak performance. While dancers are expected to know how to play certain instruments and have a basic understanding of singing, they do not play or sing during performance. At most a dancer would come to the mic to recite a composition or sing a few lines of a song, separating these vocal demonstrations from their actual dancing. But in Das' work, he put the multi-disciplinary training of Kathak dancers on stage. I argue that the visibilization of the dancers' knowledge and effort—playing an instrument, singing, and dancing all at once often left the dancers breathless and sweaty on stage—was part of Das' attempt to generate appreciation for Kathak on the audience's terms.

While I would argue that Das' style of Kathak exemplifies the flexible nature of the dance, many Kathak dancers in both the U.S. and India respond negatively to the degree to which Das has manipulated the form. Some California dancers and dance instructors were wary of talking to me for this dissertation project because they did not like that I was also featuring

Das' lineage, telling me that I needed to focus on "real Kathak dancers" or "dancers with integrity" instead.[227] His capitalization on the flexibility of Kathak in the context of diaspora triggered feelings of betrayal among other Kathak dancers who were committed to preserving a kind of practice that was centered around their inheritance from India.

Das is a uniquely diasporic artist. He did not attempt to present himself as authentic or desirable because of his connections to India; rather, he threw himself headlong into the American milieu, changing and adjusting his dance to meet the needs and interests of his new patrons. What is key to note about Das' identity as a dancer is not how many times he went to India or where he was born, but how the discourse he created around Kathak dance and his own practice was not bound by any geographic ties. He exemplified the flexible citizen, the diasporic subject who responds to the cultural logic of late capitalism by strategically relocating and finding opportunities in changing political-economic conditions (Ong 1999). Coming to the U.S. was obviously a turning point for Das career, and his work in the nascent Kathak scene propelled him to heights that may have been unachievable in the saturated dance field in India. As a transnational figure, Das formulated an identity as a dancer that was flexible, responsive, and resourceful. His Kathak practice, as Mehta described it, came out of "40 years of surviving" (Mehta, interview with the author, 2018). His story spoke to Indian-Americans; as Muni has pointed out, "Das referred to himself as a 'Bengali Rajput Californian,' giving students a window into his multivalent approach towards identity and contextualizing himself within his journey in dance" (Muni 2018, 54).

What complicates this story of flexibility and experimentation is that the Leela Institute and many other offshoots of Das' practice have framed Kathak as first and foremost an

[227] These comments were made to me off the record by three different Kathak teachers in southern California.

inheritance from Das. They apply the same logic as the Bhavan that reifies continuity and lineage, but centers Das as the primary cultural source, rather than India or Indian Culture. Mehta reflects on why she was compelled to stay with Kathak after her first class with Das:

> "My guruji's integrity toward the art and toward the work and toward his role as a teacher and as a guru kept me there. He had an incredibly high level of integrity and a sense of responsibility toward the art form, toward society, and toward his students. I would say his vision for the art form and its place in the world was expansive, far-reaching, really ahead of its time. Really against the grain. He was a real revolutionary, which is also the reason I stayed with him" (Mehta, interview with the author, 2018).

In these few sentences Mehta describes Das as both an authentic culture-bearer and a radical experimenter. In the cosmology of the Leela Institute, Das can be both. This unique Chitresh Das brand of traditionality and innovation was promoted, circulated, and fiercely reinforced by Das' mass of students and supporters, led by his senior disciples, company members, and administrative personnel. As co-founder of the Leela Institute and one of Das' senior students and company members, Mehta is the guiding force behind Chitresh Das' brand resonance in Los Angeles.

But to call it simply branding is a simplification, though there is a certainly an element of commercial marketing savvy at play. Mehta and Das' other supporters are propping up a discourse that places cultural value in affiliations with Das. I argue that while investing in the authenticating power of guru-shishya parampara on one hand, this discourse departs from the mode of assessing authentic value through direct association with India as a geographic or phantasmic place. Notions of authenticity in the Indian American community that follows Das is thus reorganized around the principle of lineage entrenched in the practice of one single guru, a man defined by his diasporic history. This is still a heritage model framing of Kathak; the dance is still pointedly fixed to a desire for continuity, a relationship with the past, and an agreed-upon notion of authenticity.

To mention that one has met or even studied under Das is a statement of legitimacy in these circles. Performances by Leela Academy students are always accompanied by mentions of Das, replete with references to the "legendary Kathak maestro." His original choreographies make up the core of the Leela Academy's repertoire, and drawing connections between the practice of new Kathak students to Das' legacy is a regular part of Academy performances, sometimes even overshadowing the role of the actual teachers like Mehta. They are positioned as ideal disciples who have proudly taken on Das' mantle, reproducing his works and pedagogy for a new generation.

For example, at a recent performance[228] by two Leela Academy students, one composition full of spins didn't quite finish on the beat that it should have. Mehta took to the mic, telling the audience how Das used to perform with musicians he had never collaborated with before, often resulting in mistakes and rhythmic aberrations like the one that had just happened. Das would simply look at the musician and say "once again," repeating the composition until it worked. With pride Mehta looked at her students and said "in honor of him, we will do these 27 turns, again" (observation, December 2, 2018). Her direction was received with wild applause from the audience. Rather directing her students to repeat the composition from her own position as their teacher, or explaining to her audience that Kathak in general is distinguished by its live, high-risk exchange between dancer and musicians, Mehta chose to center the moment around Das. He is the source of knowledge for Leela dancers, and he is also a source for cultural capital among the larger Indian-American community. Pinning pedagogical practices and choreographic decisions to Das is certainly a strategic alignment with the

[228] *Amaya*. Performances by Joya Kazi and Navi Bal, December 2, 2019, West Coast Dance Theatre, Los Angeles.

authenticity he represents in the U.S.[229] But it is also a much simpler adherence to the guru-shishya parampara. As Mehta put it, "one of the things we have chosen to do or at least try to do is […] even when we're doing brand new pieces, we try to see if there is one thing we can put this is traditional of Guruji's […] You can't divorce yourself from your history" (Mehta, interview with the author, 2018).

Kathak in Leela's practice is still fixed, but it is fixed to one flexible figure rather than an entire national imaginary. This in-between position allows Leela to capitalize on the traditionality of their dance practice by promoting the guru-shishya parampara, while also promoting the contemporary relevance of their Kathak by framing Das as a pioneer in the West. The Leela's Kathak practice is not as strictly moored to Indian nationalism, because the guru was not moored to Indian nationalism.

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In this chapter I have attempted to draw out some of the specific ways in which the Bhavan and the Leela Institute have fixed Kathak dance, focusing in particular on the construction of an imagined India and the investment in authenticating Indian practices like Hinduism and guru-shishya parampara. While the Bhavan may be a poster-child for the Indian nationalist project that has swept up the practice of classical arts like Kathak into its definition of Indian Culture, the Leela Institute is a more complex example of how Kathak practice can be fixed to notions of lineage and continuity while still being stretched to its flexible limits in

[229] Das' status as an authenticated culture bearer has been solidified by the National Endowment for the Arts, which awarded Das the National Heritage Fellowship, the nation's highest honor for folk and traditional artists, in 2009. Southern California-based Kathak dancer Anjani Ambegaokar was previously awarded a National Heritage Fellowship in 2004.

response to new audiences and infrastructures. In the next chapter I will explore how the Leela Institute uses Kathak's flexibility as a tool to navigate complex cultural identities and gain greater visibility in Los Angeles. I will also introduce the case study of Akādemi, a South Asian dance production house in London whose primary mission is to bring Indian classical arts like Kathak into the fold of what defines British culture. Examining the discursive and choreographic strategies these two institutions use to navigate the diaspora space showcases how Kathak's flexible potential can be deployed toward purposefully intercultural encounters.

Chapter 3

Kathak "Flexes" in the Integrative Model

In this chapter I will show how some Kathak practitioners and organizers have utilized the flexibility of the dance to construct and promote a sense of diasporic identity that is integrated into wider British and American national identities rather than inextricably tied to a monolithic Indian identity. I argue that these practitioners use Kathak to interrogate homogenous notions of cultural identity tied to classical Indian dance, choosing instead to reformulate the position of dances like Kathak as part of a broader shared culture that is larger than the Indian diasporic community. They do this by playing at the edges and limits of Kathak, capitalizing on the form's flexibility rather than seeking to fix the dance as essentially Indian, rooted in the past, and centered around preserving history. This position is a notable alternative to the heritage model position I described in the previous chapter, in which practitioners of Kathak frame the dance in terms of a fixed past and an exceptional Indian identity that stands apart from contemporary British or American national cultures.

I call this alternative orientation the "integrative model," in which dancers and dance advocates frame Kathak in a discourse of shared culture and sameness, rather than exceptionalism and difference. Kathak in this rendering is expansive and agile, rather than narrow and fixed. I argue that an integrative approach to Kathak is motivated by a conscious political position concerned with claiming space, commonality, and nuanced legibility in the mixed milieu of cities like Los Angeles and London. I call this practice of Kathak "integrative" because dancers and advocates operating in this model are proactively *engaging* with Western structures of knowledge through their efforts to place Kathak in the flows of shared culture in these cities, rather than explicitly challenging the hegemonic power of British and American

national culture.[230] Still, I argue that even without a radical deconstruction of hegemonic status of national culture, an integrative practice of Kathak privileges understandings of both corporeality and nationality as unfixed and fluid even as they work within fixed structures of knowledge and power. As I will show, Kathak dancers in this model exercise flexible choreographies of identification through training, performance, and representation to consider the transformative potential of dancing bodies in reformulating national identity (Rosa 2015).

I will begin by contextualizing the integrative model of Kathak dance in relation to a larger theoretical project that complicates narratives of singular national identity in a transnational era. I situate this model in theories of public culture and diaspora put forth by Arjun Appadurai (1996) and Stuart Hall (1990) that point toward responsive ways of being and adaptive modes of cultural production that are marked by heterogeneity and co-construction between multiple nodes of influence and information. Kathak in this context has the potential to intervene into monolithic notions of Indian identity and authenticity, but in doing so it risks reinforcing Western cultural hegemony in the name of adopting an integrated approach that favors the reconciliation or harmonization of difference.

In the rest of the chapter, I will use examples from the London-based South Asian dance production house Akādemi and the Los Angeles-based Leela Institute for the Arts to show how both organizations capitalize on Kathak's flexibility and responsive nature to bring the dance into mainstream British/American consciousness, reformulating British Indian and Indian American identities in the process. I will focus on **three main areas of interest**:

[230] Part of the thinking behind the word "integrative" in this dissertation comes from foundational understandings in the field of sociology that differentiate between 1) social assimilation, in which minority groups seamlessly converge with the dominant group under one shared identity, 2) integration, in which minority groups merge into the dominant group while retaining some of their unique social identifiers, and 3) ghettoization or isolation, in which minority groups maintain social and sometimes physical distance from the dominant group. For a deeper analysis of these differences, see Rea et al 2018 and Pfeffer 2014.

1) the production of Kathak dance works and programs that defy the heritage-oriented discourse of continuity and Indian nationalism in favor of individual exploration and common points of access (focusing on performance),

2) the infiltration of Kathak into culturally significant public spaces (focusing on questions of representation), and

3) the normalization of non-Indian bodies and non-Indian techniques in or alongside Kathak performance (focusing on a mixture of training, performance, and representation).

I will show how Akādemi and Leela consciously strategize around a vision for Kathak and for diasporic Indian identity that exceeds the fixed position espoused in the heritage model. However, it is important to note that the efforts I am about to describe are exactly that—efforts. Some of these endeavors succeed toward meeting the goal of promoting a more expansive and flexible identity for the dance and its dancers, while some end up reinscribing limited, sometimes Orientalist framings of Indian classical dance or Eurocentric notions of universal aesthetics. Indeed, none of the case studies in this project fall neatly or exclusively into a heritage model or an integrative model of practicing Kathak. Rather, dancers and institutions can be embedded within fields of knowledge and power that ingrain fixed notions of national identity, and still have the potential for dissent, contradiction, and transformation. Throughout this dissertation I am drawing out particular strategies employed by these case study organizations to think about the political motivations and residual effects of certain presentations of Kathak dance. Some of these strategies rely on Kathak's flexibility, and other strategies rest on fixing Kathak. In this chapter, I am focusing on strategies that rely on flexibility; in doing so, the limits and edges of that flexibility will come into view.

SECTION I: Flexible Identifications in the Integrative Model

London and Los Angeles are "public spheres," to use Appadurai's term (1996). His conception of modernity questions the salience of the nation state in a globalized context, suggesting that transnational flows of people, goods, and media are ushering in a new post-national order. In this changing context, nationality as an organizing principle is being challenged by the emergence of diasporic public spheres that unsettle the homogeneity of nation-states. Appadurai argues that a national superpower like the U.S. is "no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images but is only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscape" (1996, 31). In this model, modernization is driven not by "large-scale projects of social engineering" but by everyday cultural practice (Appadurai 1996, 9). To reflect on these changing dynamics, Appadurai calls for a new kind of ethnography that

> 1) shifts the history of ethnography from a history of neighborhoods to a history of the techniques for the production of locality; 2) opens up a new way to think about the complex coproduction of indigenous categories by organic intellectuals, administrators, linguists, missionaries, and ethnologists, which undergirds large portions of the monographic history of anthropology; 3) enables the ethnography of the modern, and of the production of locality under modern conditions (1996, 182).

My study of Kathak's flexibility in the diasporic context focuses on how the dance is deployed as a technique for the production of a locality that reflects diasporic shifts[231] and new formulations of identity.

As "crucibles of a postnational political order" where global cultural processes engage in a "mutual contest of sameness and difference on a stage characterized by radical disjunctures

[231] This includes an engagement with the various "scapes" that Appadurai identifies as the shifting ground of deterritorialized public cultures (Appadurai 1996, 33-38). These include ethnoscapes (the landscape of persons and human motion), mediascapes (the global distribution of narrative-based information and images), technoscapes (the global configuration of technology), financescapes (the disposition of global capital), and ideoscapes (the political images and narratives that circulate ideology) (Appadurai 1996, 33-38).

between different sorts of global flows and uncertain landscapes," the cities of London and Los Angeles are fertile ground for reimagining cultural identity (Appadurai 1996, 23, 43). Here, Kathak practitioners and advocates engage in the work of the imagination as a type of social action against marginal status for the dance and its dancers in the local cultural landscape (Appadurai 1996, 7). Kathak dancers in these settings have opportunities and perhaps the need to reimagine the role of Kathak in a context of heterogeneity and its relationship to diasporic identity. They tap into the same kind of collective imagining that "creates new ideas of neighborhoods and nationhood, of moral economies and unjust rule, of higher wages and foreign labor prospects. The imagination today is the staging ground for action, and not only for escape" (Appadurai 1996, 7).

Through their reimaginings of the purpose and possibilities of Kathak dance, I suggest that these practitioners are attempting to create "cascades" of new images of Kathak, new ways of thinking about and engaging with Kathak, and new kinds of dancing subjects that are meant to intervene into monolithic and exotic notions of Indian diasporic identity and Indian classical dance on a larger scale (Appadurai 1996, 153-156). I suggest that flexible renderings of Kathak in the integrative model are kinds of macroevents that

> work their way into highly localized structures of feeling by being drawn into the discourse and narratives of the locality, in casual conversations and low-key editorializing of the sort that often accompanies the collective reading of newspapers in many neighborhoods and on many front stoops of the world […] They are part of the incessant murmur of urban political discourse and its constant, undramatic cadences. But persons and groups at this most local level generate those structures of feeling that over time provide the discursive field within which the explosive rumors, dramas, and speeches of the riot can take hold (Appadurai 1996, 153).

Though Appadurai was originally talking about the ways in which macroevents like global politics can trickle down to local instances of ethnic violence, I am interested in his description

of how macroevents can permeate daily discourse to create localized structures of feeling[232] which become the engine for reformulations of identity. As Appadurai describes,

> These local feelings are the product of long-term interactions of local and global cascades of events that build up structures of feeling, which are both social and historical and are part of the environment within which, gradually, it becomes possible to envisage a neighbor as a fiend, a shopkeeper as a foreign traitor, and a local trader as a ruthless capitalist exploiter. Once this anthology of images is activated […] we are assured that there will be fresh episodes of recollection, interpretation, and suffering, which after the riot subsides will work their way once again into new local structures of feeling (Appadurai 1996, 153).

In the integrative model of Kathak dance, I am suggesting that dancers and institutions apply the work of the imagination to create macroevents that have the power to rewrite the discourse around Kathak in support of a diasporic conception of identity that is not fixed to Indian nationalism of the past. They do this through the slow and steady cultivation of local feelings that help dancers and audiences envisage Kathak as more than an artifact of Indian exceptionalism, as perhaps part of British or American culture itself.

The integrative model of Kathak marries a flexible understanding of Kathak with a flexible understanding of diaspora. As Stuart Hall writes: "diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea. This is the old, the imperialising, the hegemonising, form of 'ethnicity'" (Hall 1990, 235). He critiques a "backwards looking" notion of diaspora that fixes people to geographically removed and sometimes mythical origins, as I outlined in the heritage model of Kathak dance. Instead, Hall outlines a diaspora experience "defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and

[232] Appadurai is utilizing Raymond Williams theory of localized structures of meaning (Williams 1961). Williams, Raymond. "The Long Revolution (1961)." *Reprinted Harmondsworth: Penguin* (1965).

through, not despite, difference: by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall 1990, 235).

It is through this productive and imaginative process of identification that Kathak can begin to flex its potential as a tool for the expression and complication of diasporic identity. The institutions and dancers I visit in this chapter on the integrative model of Kathak dance lean into the heterogeneity and diversity of diasporic life to produce new works and new framings of the dance that in turn complicate dominant notions of Indianness, Britishness, and Americanness. They do this through a series of what Cristina Rosa calls flexible choreographies of (self-) identification, whereby "players become active participants in the communities they imagine for themselves" (Rosa 2015, 121). While many scholars have theorized corporeality as a method of engagement with a world that is non-static and unfixed,[233] Rosa upends this idea with her conceptualization of identitarian flexibility in the context of postcolonial Brazil.

Her study looks at the processes of national identification as they play out on the body, while recognizing that the body is embedded within and interpellated by structures of knowledge and power that choreographies of identification can reinforce or transgress.[234] Rosa describes flexible choreographies of identification as the way "people organize their bodies to articulate

[233] See Castaldi 2006, Srinivasan 2011, Daniel 2005, Savigliano 1995, O'Shea 2007, Borelli 2016, and Mitra 2015.
[234] She highlights the "*ginga* aesthetic" as a kind of choreography of identification that constructs Brazil as an imagined community around Africanist epistemologies and aesthetic principles as a political turn away from colonial frames of knowledge about and power over Brazilian people (Rosa 2015, 16). The ginga aesthetic as a producer of knowledge about Brazil is its own kind of discourse, one that Rosa contends can swing in the direction of perpetuating both pride and shame in relation to Brazilian national identity (Rosa 2015, 58). The contradictory nature of the "pride-and-shame conundrum" reiterates points made by Foucault, O'Shea, and Castaldi that suggest the simultaneous existence of multiple contradictory discourses that can be tapped into in strategic ways to support different political or social ends, particularly when it comes to the formulation of national identities (Rosa 2015, 49-53). Ginga does not exist in a vacuum of ethnic or national pride; rather, "to this day the articulation of Africanist movements of bodily syncopation and/or undulation continues to incite contradictory affects, from pleasure, desire, and pride to fear, anxiety and shame" (Rosa 2015, 58).

ideas in scenarios such as concert dance, social dance, and martial arts […] the space people construct as they move around and how the environments where they step into also shape these moving bodies" (Rosa 2015, 6). Drawing from Susan Foster's work defining choreography as a "framework of decisions that implements a set of representational strategies,"[235] Rosa examines "how bodies (are expected to) look like, move, behave, and interact with one another and thus, how choreography relates to other systems of representation," allowing her "to see more clearly how the cultural interactions in a country like Brazil happen at the bodily level," (Rosa 2015, 7).

Flexible choreographies of identity support multiple ways of being that allow moving bodies to navigate, refute, and invest in differing discourses. They contribute to the theorization of identity formation as a pliable, decentralized, and multilayered process (Rosa 2015, 7), thereby enabling dancers and institutions to carve out original places between discourses of tradition, innovation, nationality, and belonging. These flexible choreographies can be deployed in multiple contradictory directions, as both a "productive, non- hegemonic 'technique of the self,'" and as a restrictive investment in fixed ways of being (Rosa 2015, 121). Thus, flexible choreographies of identification have the power to create certain kinds of subjects and circulate knowledge about those subjects in ways that can either limit or engage with multiple kinds of identification. In this sense, the heritage model renderings of Kathak described in Chapter 2 are also a kind of choreography of identification, one that organizes bodies around a common goal of promoting a distinguished and singular Indian identity in the context of cultural multiplicity in diaspora through a certain kind of Kathak practice.

[235] Foster, Susan Leigh. "Choreographies of gender." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 24.1 (1998): 1-33.

In this chapter, I am concerned with how a theory of flexible choreographies of identification offers a way to consider the adaptive and transformative potential of dancing bodies in privileging understandings of both corporeality and nationality as fluid. With the movement from the national to the transnational sphere, there are opportunities to redefine how individuals engage with the world and identify with race, nation and culture. Choreographies of identity that utilize Kathak's flexible potential enable responsive ways of being, knowing, and moving. The integrative model of Kathak dance in the diaspora is an intervention into fixity through an exercise of situational agency and imaginations constituted by flexible choreographies of identity that draw on a conception of diaspora and diasporic identity as emergent, response, and co-constructed by the vast interconnections that create global public spheres.

Kathak dancers and organizers in my study have shown a conscious effort toward complicating and transforming the identities of Indian diasporic subjects. In this chapter I will show how this community utilizes Kathak dance as a productive, creative source for visibility and agency beyond its Indian nationalist history. Bringing Kathak into British and American national culture for these practitioners is a part of a project to make visible the heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity of diasporic life that is often presented as monolithic, fixed, and "fossilized", as one Kathak teacher put it.[236] Practitioners enact an integrative framing of Kathak as a responsive part of a larger, shared, accessible public culture, sometimes inflected by Eurocentric formations of culture, through a variety of methods ranging from strategic programming to professional development. Exploring a few of the ways Kathak is deployed in

[236] Mehta, Sushma. Personal interview. August 6, 2015.

the integrative model, and how these efforts seek to transform and adapt notions of British, American, and Indian identity, is the subject of the rest of this chapter.

I begin with a look at a few of the ways in which both Leela and Akādemi produce Kathak works and programs that do not prioritize Indian nationalism as an inherent value or mandate. Instead, these examples showcase some of the different pathways for Kathak that unlink the dance—to some extent—from nationalist discourses.

SECTION II: Non-Nationalist Pathways for Kathak Dance

In this section I will consider a few of the new pathways for Kathak dance that have been introduced by practitioners and organizers in London and Los Angeles. I will look particularly at programs that 1) enable dancers to explore new themes and possibilities in their Kathak work from an individual point of view, and 2) expand the range of access points into the Kathak form by connecting the dance to health and wellness and focusing on familiar systems like rhythm. Instead of relying on nationalist discourses of Indian heritage, these strategies capitalize on the flexible and responsive nature of Kathak to reach new audiences, claim fresh relevance, and complicate the cultural identification of Kathak dance and Kathak dancers in diasporic contexts.

Individual Exploration: Choreography Commissions

Iterations of Kathak dance in the integrative model utilize the flexible components of improvisation and creative interpretation, the assortment of storytelling tools embedded in the form, and the value for rasic experience to enable and encourage individual dancers to explore new applications of Kathak according to their personal interests, political positions, and

professional goals. This iteration of Kathak is different from heritage model renderings of the dance, in which the authenticating power of fixed repertoires, character archetypes, and interpretive styles tied to guru-shishya parampara and gharana allegiances reign supreme. I suggest that the integrative model is defined in part by the space available for individual Kathak artists to guide the production of new dance works from the ground up, rather than in response to or in continuation of a legacy, lineage, or precedent. That "space" includes both physical space in the sense of platforms for research, development, and performance, as well as a place within a new value system where departure from precedents and lineages are affirmed and incentivized. I am not suggesting that dancers who apply Kathak in novel ways are operating free of influence from heritage model values and discourses around authenticity and preservation. Instead, what I am showing in this chapter is how institutions like Akādemi and the Leela Institute create spaces for exploration, affirm individual creativity, and set up structures of funding and development that facilitate individual expression. None of this happens in a vacuum, and throughout the sections to come I will allude to how integrative model values and programs come into contact, conflict, and/or collaboration with heritage model practices and discourses.

The production house Akādemi has been a key figure in the field of structural sustainability for an integrative model practice of Kathak dance in London. Founded in 1979 as the National Academy for Indian Dance (before being renamed Akādemi in 1998), this institution was founded by dancer Tara Rajkumar. Rajkumar had arrived in London from New Delhi, the capital of India and a hub for Indian classical arts at a large and prestigious scale. The daughter of a bureaucrat, Rajkumar was exposed to a high level of classical dance as part of her daily life. After moving to London, she felt a distinct loss; according to current Akādemi director Mira Kaushik, Rajkumar "found herself lost in this country and really wanted to set up

something which was to become part of the mainstream of this country. That was Tara's ambition. It was to take classical Indian dance into the mainstream rather than keep it as a [...] community activity" (Kaushik, interview with the author, 2015).

While integrating Indian classical dance into the fabric of British cultural life was a mission built into Akādemi from the beginning, the institution's methods have changed over time. It evolved from an "academy" in the sense of a school for music and dance in the 1980s into "Akādemi," an organized patron and advocate for South Asian[237] dance similar to the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the government body and official patron of the classical arts in India. While the British Akādemi is an independent non-profit, not a government agency, it functions in a similar way by providing funding, visibility, and advocacy for Indian classical artists in London and the U.K. more broadly. Dropping "National" and "Indian" from Akādemi's original name was strategically

> liberating as it did not essentialize the identity of the organization within territorializing and localizing labels of the 'national' and the 'Indian' and empowered [Akādemi director] Kaushik to build partnerships with London-based organizations as any contemporary arts institution or Academy. Yet by retaining the uglized [sic] spelling, Akādemi was able to situate itself in history as a postcolonial Academy/Akādemi" (Meduri 2008, 235).

Akādemi no longer offers a regular schedule of dance classes, choosing to focus instead on grooming advanced dancers for professional careers in the British dance circuit. According to Kaushik, Akādemi sees "loads and loads of Indian dance students, and a few dancers [...] who have come out of dance classes and started to perform on stage [...] without having the performance skills." The institution sees itself as an intermediary between amateur Indian

[237] Akādemi has a history of using "South Asian" instead of "Indian" in describing their work as part of an appeal to a broader demographic based that includes practitioners from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and other regions that may float in and out of the South Asian label. My dissertation is concerned specifically with Indian diasporic subjects, but I use "South Asian" occasionally in the context of describing Akādemi's work in their own terms.

classical dancers and their potential professional careers. Part of that role involves mentoring emerging artists on everything from costuming and lighting design to marketing and creating new work for new audiences. A unique embodiment of Akādemi's professional development mission is their Choreography Commissions program, which funds a research and development phase for dancers to "develop their choreographic practice"[238] and "to take a risk and hone their creative vision."[239] Through the Choreography Commissions program, Akādemi awards dancers amounts between £2,000 and £5,000 to produce new choreographic work either on themselves or for another dancer or group of dancers. While the application for the program states that "Akādemi will accept applications from the entire Indian dance canon; including all varieties of Indian dance from classical to contemporary, and everything in between,"[240] the eligibility criteria requires a professional background in an Indian classical dance style. At the end of the grant period, the works-in-progress are presented at the annual Alchemy Festival of South Asian art organized by Akādemi at the Southbank Centre, one of the largest arts spaces in the London.

In 2017, three Kathak dancers received choreography commissions from Akādemi, and all three delivered works that pointedly bypassed normative presentations of the dance. Instead of replaying material from their guru's lineage or performing crowd-pleasing versions of affective Indianness, these dancers used the cornerstones of Kathak—namely the technique of abhinaya to generate moving rasa in amongst the audience—to produce distinctly political works that reflected each artists' individual interests, life experiences, and relationship with the dance.

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[238] "Choreography Commissions," *Akādemi,* https://Akādemi .co.uk/artist-development/choreography-commissions. Accessed January 22, 2019.
[239] Program for *Choreography Commissions 2019* at the Southbank Center, London. Akādemi, 2017.
[240] "Akādemi Choreography Commissions," GemArts, https://gemarts.org/projects/131/Akādemi -choreography-commission. Accessed January 22, 2019.

Kathak dancer Parbati Chaudhury began the evening of performances, which took place in an intimate black-box theater tucked away in the bowels of the Southbank Centre. According to program notes from the evening, Chaudhury's piece *Growing Pains* "addresses the threat and reality of homelessness affecting hundreds of thousands of people across the U.K. Kathak dancer Parbati Chaudhury evokes the trauma of losing one's home in this sensitive piece of dance-theatre" (program notes). Reading those notes prepared the audience to interpret her movements, much of which was informed by the mimetic practice of abhinaya. Seated downstage center, Chaudhury began to pack imaginary bags. Her face and movements heavy with an ever-changing mix of longing, frustration, determination, she grabs unseen items, throwing them into her bags. The sequence is reminiscent of the Kathak tradition of *bhav batana*, or seated expressive storytelling through mime, a practice that focuses all attention on the use of gesture and facial expression. In Chaudhury's version, her torso twists and jerks, breaking with the lines and gentle curves of a normative Kathak body and pushing back on the elegance and control usually associated with bhav batana. A male performer stands on the sidelines, watching Chaudhury and humming a plaintive tune. Suddenly, Chaudhury speaks. Addressing an unseen child, she recites a lullaby in both Hindi and English: "The fish is the queen of the water / Water is her life / Touch her and she'll get scared / Take her out and she will die / Put her back in and she will survive" (observation, May 29, 2017). Eventually Parbati stands, carrying her weighted bags, twirling and stamping her feet in rhythm to her accompanists snapping fingers. She is struggling, her face contorting in pain and helplessness, her body whirling without control while her accompanist stoically repeats "Machli, dies" (ibid). The lights go out as she continues to twist and turn, a body caught in a rigged system, the sounds of her pattering feet and swishing body filling the dark room.

The work, including the staging, choreography, and dialogue, is entirely Chaudhury's own creation. She did not use the Choreography Commissions platform to restring a series of compositions and movements taught to her by her guru, nor did she seem burdened by representing any particular stylistic lineage. In this context, representing the past was not part of her responsibility as a Kathak dancer as it so often is in other performance contexts that are in the shadow of guru-shishya parampara. The story she shared did not pull from Indian literature or scripture, but from real life in the U.K. today, introducing difficult subject matter that would not have appealed to historical patrons of Kathak dance who sought beauty and divinity in the dancing body. Though she wasn't enacting traditional character archetypes like the *nayikas* (heroines) that are described in Indian performance texts like the *Natya Sastra*, Chaudhury was relying on character embodiment and the relationship between abhinaya, bhava, and rasa to tell the story of homelessness. Her work is a simple but clear example of how the foundational, flexible elements of Kathak can be stretched into a dance that is as relevant to social issues in the U.K. as it is to phantasmic Indian identity.

The second Kathak dancer to perform that night was Raheem Mir, presenting a choreography titled *Too Gay, To Play, To Say: Toshéa*. Once again, the audience is primed by a descriptive set of program notes that outline Mir's thought process and offer a point of reference for interpreting his performance. Mir aims to "look into the segregations within a community that prides itself on integration. A community which doesn't discriminate but does, [...] a specific, darkly-comedic and immersive insight on my dating life and how men have viewed me, spoken to me and treated me. What it's like to be a 24-year-old virgin and proud of it" (program notes). The piece began as a cross between stand-up comedy and spoken word poetry, with Mir recounting the ups and downs of his dating life as a queer South Asian man in the U.K. Dressed

in a midriff-revealing black top and multi-colored *lehenga* (the voluminous skirt traditionally worn in Kathak storytelling performance), shimmering with gaudy mirror work, Mir addresses the audience directly, slipping in some provocations like "Anyone done anal?" amidst jokes about homophobic slurs that have been thrown his way.

Mir abruptly breaks from the casual comedy routine into fast, troubled, almost pained whirling; head thrown back, arms floating like ribbons, he engages his entire body with sudden, intense energy. Like Chaudhury, Mir employs Kathak's chakkars to signal circular anxiety, systemic and never-ending struggle. Rather than signifying a virtuosic display of control, the chakkars in these dances become an expression of being out of control. He dances fully and frantically to a song about the monsoon season, mixing identifiable Kathak hand gestures with interludes of mimed texting on his cell phone. He merges traditional notions of romance and longing attached to the monsoon season (a popular theme in Kathak storytelling practice), with the reality of his actual romantic life replete with triumph and shame. The music stops, and Mir playfully begins stripping for the audience. He removes his skirt with a coy smile, but as he takes off more pieces of clothing, Mir's smile gives way to shame, guilt, and sadness. Naked except for a small pair of underpants, Mir lies on the ground defeated. He reaches for his sparkly, colorful skirt—his other skin—and wraps himself in its folds. The lights go out.

Like Chaudhury, Mir is telling a story with his work, again utilizing the foundational narrative potential of Kathak. Unlike Chaudhury, Mir's story is not necessarily linear—instead, he uses the emotive and narrative qualities of Kathak to share snatches of what it is like to be him. Some of this is communicated through theatrical dialogue, some through expressive abhinaya, and some through dynamic nritta (pure dance) that is charged with feelings of anxiety, mania, lust, and fear. In addition to his deconstructed approach to narrative, Mir stretches Kathak

to address a subject matter that is almost invisible in dominant practices of Kathak: homosexuality. While Kathak has not historically shied away from romantic or even erotic material,[241] exploring homosexuality is new territory for Kathak dancers. Mir couples this with a contemporary life condition that includes texting, dancing at clubs, hooking up, and being rejected to create a Kathak work that is unquestionably relevant to British life today. His Kathak tears the dance away from its fixed and often highly conservative position as a pure artifact of normative Indian culture and places it at the center of his own reality.

The final Kathak piece of the night was choreographed by Brazilian Kathak dancer Manuela Benini and performed by American Kathak dancer, Natalia Hildner. The title *Mare Nostrum*, which means "Our Sea" in Latin, refers to a 2013 search and rescue operation by the Italian navy that claimed to have saved thousands of refugee lives off the coast of Libya. Like Chaudhury's piece, *Mare Nostrum* deals with a social issue of both local and international importance that is not concerned with traditional character types or traditional stories from the Indian context. According to the program notes, "this solo work-in-progress piece that uses the vocabulary of traditional Kathak dance [...] combining classical Indian dance and unconventional stories for survival in what is considered one of the most dangerous journeys in the world" (program notes). Hildner dances to a soundscape evoking a journey at sea, once again employing evocative facial expressions and mimetic gestures to invoke images of pushing, grasping, escaping, and to create a mood of tension, fear, and suspicion. Unlike the other two choreographers, Benini has mimicked a traditional Kathak performance format by punctuating the expressive sequences with identifiable rhythmic compositions like tihais and toras. However,

[241] Much of Kathak's storytelling practice is dedicated to the embodiment of the divine lovers Radha and Krishna, who represent desirable heterosexuality. But even their relationship has often been cleansed of its erotic charge and recast as everything from a playful bond between two children to a strictly devotional bond between Radha as a mortal woman and Krishna as a divine being.

she manipulates key aspects of these traditional compositions to serve the overarching theme of fear and loss.

For example, Hildner's footwork patterns fade away before arriving at the all-important first beat or *sum*; the moment that is usually marked with clarity and triumph is presented as muddled or forgotten. The moment of sum is either mislaid, or marked by postures that sink with defeated weight, rather than traditional postures that rise up with masterful strength and control. The piece ends with Hildner staring directly at the audience, making eye contact with several audience members before settling on one person and pointing at them silently. In this instance Kathak's fundamental implication of the audience in the performance is extrapolated to implicate the audience in the international refugee crisis. It is rasic communion with a sharp message of activism.

I've offered brief descriptions of these three choreographies from Kathak artists to showcase how they each apply the core techniques of abhinaya, the fundamental goals of storytelling and rasa development, and even an intermittent adherence to taal, to create works that diverge significantly from traditional presentations of Kathak dance. These choreographies are not retellings of conventional Kathak stories or regurgitations of canonical repertoires. They do not seek to represent Indian cultural norms or create images of Indian cultural identity, nor do they replay the movements of gurus. Rather, the choreographers reformulated Kathak techniques and aesthetics into distinctly political stories that touched on subject matters relevant to their contemporary life as citizens of the U.K. and indeed as citizens of the world.

In other words, these choreographers are participating in a "local production of meaning" as part of their navigation of shifting contexts and life conditions through dance (O'Shea 2007). They employ Kathak as a "dynamic method of engagement with a changing world" that plays

out on the individual level (O'Shea 2007, 24). To engage with a "changing world," these dancers have turned to a model of Kathak dance that embraces change, evolution, and flexibility in the form. Kathak in these renderings is a self-conscious tool towards distinct artistic goals unrelated to concerns for continuity, cultural preservation, and cultural visibility that the dance form is tied to in the heritage model context. The Choreography Commissions program created the necessary space for Kathak dancers to engage in such work. By providing the funding, the platform, and frankly the recognition for a flexible engagement with Kathak to occur outside of frameworks of "authentic" Indian heritage, Akādemi is contributing to the widening of Kathak's relevance in the British context. "I do believe that classical Indian dance is ever-evolving," said Kaushik. "It changes with every person and body. Nobody does the same dance all the time. It's just a myth" (Kaushik, interview with the author, 2015).

Performances at the 2017 Choreography Commissions showing were followed by a Q&A session with the audience. During the Q&A, Mir commented on how Indian classical dancers are expected to appear "aesthetically pleasing and traditional," commending Akādemi for the opportunity for dancers to show who they actually are, to take risks instead of doing what has been conditioned into them (observation, May 29, 2017). Dancers in this model are able to explore subjectivities and stories that are outside of the norm of Indian classical dance but are very much central to their own political, social, and cultural existence through Kathak. The Choreography Commissions showing was also one of the few Kathak showcases where dancers were not introduced and described almost entirely in terms of their training and guru lineage. From beginning to end, these artists were exactly that—independent artists in their own right, rather than continuations of something or someone else.

While the flexibility of Kathak was actually implemented and showcased by the choreographers, I wish to emphasize that the structural contributions of organizations like Akādemi play vital roles in allowing Kathak's flexibility to be realized in performance. Without the money supplied by Akādemi, there is very little financial incentive to produce new and personal works of classical Indian dance. This sentiment was echoed by the performers at the Choreography Commissions showing, where the Q&A session ended with an American dancer deploring the lack of funding for creative work in the U.S., leading the audience to offer a hearty "hear hear!" in honor of Akādemi's efforts to support flexible applications of Indian classical dance (ibid).

Common Points of Access: Rhythm

One of the arguments I am making about integrative model avatars of Kathak dance is that, in these expressions of Kathak, Indian national identity and Indian national heritage are not the main pathways into the dance. Dancers, organizers, and the general public do not always access and understand Kathak through a framing of Indianness and a celebration of cultural difference. Instead, one marker of an integrative model approach to Kathak is the investment in alternate pathways into the dance focusing on points of access that are more relevant to mixed audiences than the assertion of exceptional Indian cultural identity. This is not to say that these alternate pathways into Kathak exist outside of structures of nationalism, ethnicity, and cultural difference; rather, I am suggesting that in the integrative model of Kathak there is a greater attempt to frame the dance in other ways. I will explore two very different examples of how Kathak has been self-consciously framed as something more than a cultural artifact: namely, as an expression of rhythm, and as a tool for improving mental and physical health. I argue that

these alternate framings of the dance in terms of readily accessible ideas like rhythm and health are strategic attempts to reshape the dance into something that is relevant, legible, and shared in non-Indian contexts. Dancers and dance advocates do this by flexing certain aspects of Kathak, stretching the dance to meet audience members and participants halfway.

I'll begin with the example of rhythm-driven Kathak at the Leela Institute, or, more specifically, in productions by the Leela Collective. One of the most successful and groundbreaking productions developed by the Kathak artist Chitresh Das, the Institute's grand-guru, was *India Jazz Suites*. The production grew out of a rhythmic exchange between Das and acclaimed tap dancer Jason Samuels Smith. Their collaboration was framed in many ways—as a meeting of Indian diasporic culture with African American culture, a creative competition between a practiced elder with a young performer—but the takeaway message always centered on the shared language of rhythm between two seemingly different dances, two musical traditions, and two individuals. Described as "high entertainment which crosses all boundaries of age, race, and culture," and sometimes subtitled "The Fastest Feet in Rhythm," *India Jazz Suites* showcased improvisational approaches to the rhythmic cycles that define both Hindustani classical music and jazz, creating space for Das and Smith to play, respond, diverge, and converge rhythmically through the course of the evening. Neither attempted to embody the other's form; rather, they carefully laid out the frameworks of rhythm and percussive techniques that both differentiated each form and made them similar. The audience was guided toward an understanding of Kathak dance that was based in math, rhythmic improvisation, and live co-creation.

Many performances of *India Jazz Suites* were preceded by Das' production *Shabd*. In *Shabd*, members of the Chitresh Das Dance Company warmed the audience up to the concept of

rhythmic math through the performance of Kathak Yoga, an invention of Das' in which dancers perform rhythmic variations with their feet while counting out the beats of a cycle, singing the *bols* of the cycle (or a different cycle), and/or playing a cycle on an instrument (like the tabla, the harmonium, or the hand cymbals called *manjira*).[242] Kathak Yoga is a display of rhythmic control and fast footwork in a format that underlines rhythmic knowledge as *the* cornerstone of Kathak dance. It takes an unspoken but foundational aspect of Kathak—the adherence to and improvisation on *taal*—and makes it explicit as the centerpiece of the performance.

I give this background to set up one of the Leela Collective's current productions: *Speak*. In *Speak*, two disciples of Das—Leela co-founders Rina Mehta and Rachna Nivas—share the stage with tap dancers Michelle Dorrance and Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards. The setup of the production is very similar to *India Jazz Suites*, exploring the similarities and distinctions between Kathak and tap through live improvisations between the dancers, Hindustani classical musicians, and jazz musicians. The Collective describes *Speak* as follows:

> Indian Kathak dance and American tap dance, continents and ages apart, share parallel stories of struggle and perseverance. They come together in this sensational collaboration that is rhythm, poetry, storytelling, music and dance. SPEAK carries forward the legacy of iconic artists like Pandit Chitresh Das, Dr. Jimmy Slyde and James Buster Brown, while bringing to the forefront the voices of powerful female artists. Serving as the bridge between tradition and innovation, history and progress, Rina Mehta, Rachna Nivas, Michelle Dorrance, and Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards create nothing short of magic on the stage.[243]

In the production, Leela Collective dancers Mehta and Nivas offer short solo pieces that highlight Kathak's rhythmic variations through traditional repertoire items such as *thaat* and *tora*, while tap dancers Michelle Dorrance and Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards present traditional

[242] See: "Kathak Yoga – Chitresh Das Dance Company makes history." *YouTube*, uploaded by Chhandam, December 10, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HNOLB5AJS6Y, ; "Kathak Yoga (Part 1 of 2)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Asian Art Museum, June 24, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OXohaAeg5ns.
[243] "Speak," *Leela Dance Collective*, https://theleelainstitute.org/repertoire/speak/. Accessed March 10, 2019.

tap solos. The bulk of the production, however, puts the two forms together. Dorrance and Sumbry-Edwards jam with Hindustani classical musicians, while Mehta and Nivas improvise with the jazz trio. The finale features all the performers in fast-paced, responsive, playful exchange. The show has been described in a language of communion and shared culture: it features a "common language of rhythm" in "dynamic conversation."[244]

In the production and circulation of *Speak*, the Leela Collective is following in Das' footsteps to propagate a kind of Kathak practice that is rooted in something larger than Indian identity and heritage politics. While there is much superficial reference to "tradition" and "lineage" in promotional materials for *Speak*, in actuality the program is invested primarily in a universalist framing of Kathak as a rhythmic dance just like any other rhythmic form. It emphasizes the idea that "rhythm and musicality is what allows Kathak and tap to speak to each other."[245] *Speak* created a pathway into the dance for other artists and audience members that was based in accessible ideas of rhythm, math, and musical improvisation, a pathway originally forged and championed by Das. *Speak* relies on improvisation, one of the cornerstones of Kathak's flexibility. In Mehta's words:

> This is the foundation of all Indian classical music and dance—improvisation. As Indian classical dance and music has struggled to evolve and reinvent itself in the face of a changing world and changing audiences, this core principle of the art has often been thrown aside and the art form has gone towards choreography and high-end production. At Leela we are committed to sustaining this sense of joy and play that is central to the art form.[246]

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[244] Speak – Rhythm in Feet. Tour teaser. *Facebook*, February 20, 2019, 9:02 p.m., https://www.facebook.com/SPEAKRhythmInFeet/videos/2025643050888793/.
[245] Speak – Rhythm in Feet. Tour teaser with Rina Mehta quote. *Facebook*, February 16, 2019, 2:25 a.m., https://www.facebook.com/SPEAKRhythmInFeet/posts/416775572226564?__tn__=C-R.

[246] "Leela Dance Set to Bring Two Powerful Kathak Performances to California." *IndiaWest*, https://www.indiawest.com/entertainment/global/leela-dance-set-to-bring-two-powerful-kathak-performances-to/article_b00c1b1a-0a8e-11e7-84df-3b1706af55cf.html. Accessed March 10, 2019.

Mehta is affirming that Kathak's collaboration with tap is not a problematic extrapolation of the form. Rather, Kathak shares foundations with tap, and in focusing on those foundations the Collective is able to show a hidden side of Kathak that is only about rhythm. When *Speak* went on tour in India in February of 2019, the name changed from *Speak: Tap and Kathak Unite* to *Speak: Rhythm in Feet*, perhaps signaling that the Collective realized how deeply the rhythmic framework generated public interest and pointed toward the production's wider relevance.

What the Leela Collective is doing with *Speak* is attempting to broaden the relevance of Kathak in the U.S. market and increase its accessibility to mixed audiences by presenting the dance through an accessible language of rhythm and improvisation. From the simple costumes that only gestured toward traditional Kathak costume, particularly in the show's *Rhythm in Feet* iteration, to the minimal inclusion of the religious material, coded abhinaya, and Hindi or Sanskrit language lyrics that usually appear at some point in a Kathak performance, *Speak* takes pains to decenter the recognizable "Indianness" of Kathak. Instead, the Collective capitalizes on the legibility of tap dance and jazz music in the U.S. to insert Kathak into that same space and tag Kathak with the same identifiers. According to *Speak* performer Nivas, "what's really powerful is creating oneness, without changing the other."[247] In aligning Kathak with tap, the Collective is pushing its way into the American mainstream, attempting to convince audiences that Kathak is something more than an Indian cultural artifact. It is a limber, responsive, and creative practice of its own that is easily at home with a jazz trio.

[247] "Rhythm Unites Tap, Indian Classical Dancers." *San Francisco Examiner*, http://www.sfexaminer.com/rhythm-unites-tap-indian-classical-dancers/. Accessed March 10, 2019.

Common Points of Access: Health and Wellness

In 2016, Akādemi launched the program Dance Well, a series of participatory workshops and small-scale performances targeted at three particular audiences: individuals "living with dementia, older adults with little physical activity and who may be isolated in the community, (and) those living with poor long term heart and lung health."[248] Akādemi employs South Asian dance artists from many different forms including Kathak to bring dance into hospitals, care homes, and community centers that serve these audiences. As of 2017, the program had served more than 900 older adults through more than 200 workshops.[249] Dance Well is built on the basic idea that dance or any kind of art is good for your health. As Akādemi describes it:

> The creative arts are known to act as agents of wellness and healing, through stimulation of creativity and by incorporating music, movement, humour and aesthetics (2010, Malchiodi) and dance can therefore provide a creative, nurturing enjoyable alternative. By increasing levels of physical activity through dance classes, it may be possible to delay the onset of such diseases and increase overall levels of physical and mental health and wellbeing.[250]

In fact, a push for increased investment in preventative health in the U.K. has led the British Health Secretary to begin paving the way for doctors to prescribe dance, music, and other engagement with art as part of the treatment for ailments ranging from lung disease to mental health.[251] Akādemi goes even further to suggest that the South Asian arts are *particularly* effective in improving health outcomes for older adults and those living with mental illness.[252] According to the Dance Well Evaluation Report:

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[248] "Dance Well Akādemi." 2017. Postcard.
[249] Farmer, Claire. *Dance Well Evaluation Report: 2016-2019.* London: Akādemi, 2018.
[250] "Dance Well." *Akādemi*, https://Akādemi .co.uk/learning-and-participation/dance-well. Accessed February 23, 2019.
[251] "British Doctors May Soon Prescribe Art, Music, Dance, Singing Lessons." *Smithsonian Magazine,* https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/british-doctors-may-soon-prescribe-art-music-dance-singing-lessons-180970750/. Accessed February 23, 2019.
[252] I wish to note here that it is not the purpose of this study to determine whether or not dances like Kathak quantifiably improve health outcomes for at-risk individuals. Instead, I look at the fact that the dance is even positioned in this way to consider how Akādemi is creating alternate realities for Kathak dance.

> It was felt that dance forms such as Kathak, Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Kuchipudi and Bollywood, amongst others, offered specific nuances not necessarily found in other dance forms, that would be of benefit to the older generation. Over the course of the last 3 years of Dance Well we have found this to be true, with Mudras [hand gestures] offering participants the opportunity to exercise and articulate the sometimes stiff joints of the fingers and wrist. Mudras also provide the chance for participants to create stories, something that has been particularly well received by participants living with dementia. Rhythms have also been integral to the enjoyment and integration of participants. As has been experienced through history, rhythm has an ability to bring people together in a common beat and often then leading to organic movement. Dance has the ability to give an older person autonomy over their movement at a time in their lives when this may not be common, particularly for those in care settings or hospitals. Reconnecting with their body, rediscovering what it is capable of, can be an uplifting and joyous moment (Farmer 2018, 7).

The position that dance, including forms like Kathak, can provide noticeable health benefits may not seem like a dramatic example of the alternative modes of cultural production that have the power to revolutionize diasporic identity. However, I argue that the focused application of Kathak dance in the sphere of health and wellness opens the door to a foundational reformulation of the purpose and value of the form wholly outside of national identity politics. In this iteration, Kathak is largely untethered from Indian nationalism. Instead, the dance is refined to its technical qualities and repackaged into a more relevant toolkit for wellness. While there is an element of fashionable multiculturalism in bringing Kathak dance techniques into non-normative, largely white spaces like British care homes, the dance is nevertheless stretched into a new relevance that exceeds discourses of culture and nation.

What does this actually look like in practice? While I did not have the opportunity to witness Dance Well Kathak workshops in person, the instructional video series created as part of the program offers some insight into exactly how Kathak dance techniques are reshaped into tools for better health.[253] Since the videos were made with the purpose of circulating to other

[253] The full video series can be found on Akādemi's YouTube page. "Akādemi SouthAsianDan." *YouTube*. Accessed February 23, 2019.

health and wellness practitioners inside and outside the Indian classical dance world as a "toolbox of activities,"[254] it is useful to look at these videos as examples of how Akādemi is consciously reformulating Kathak for non-specialist audiences. In the video titled "Easy Cardiovascular | Mudra Dance," Kathak dancer Jane Chan appears seated against a plain white backdrop. She is dressed very simply in solid colors—a plain pink kurta, or tunic top, and a plain white lehenga or skirt. Besides these relatively toned-down pieces of Indian apparel, there are no other markers of Indian cultural identity. Chan herself is from Hong Kong, and speaks with a British accent. She begins the video with an explanation:

> This is a very good exercise to develop the joints and the wrists and the fingers. Mudras [codified hand gestures] are an integral part of Kathak, and here are some of the mudras I'll be putting into the *Sound of Music's* 'Do Re Mi,' which is a song that most people in this country would know [...] it's quite nice to encourage participants to sing and dance and to perform, and to have ownership over a piece of short dance that they could show their family and friends later on.[255]

Chan goes on to demonstrate some mimetic upper body movements that illustrate the lyrics of the *Sound of Music* song. For example, she uses the codified hand gestures of *singhamukha* to depict prancing deer, *hansasya* to depict the careful threading of a needle, and *katkamukha* to depict the drinking of tea complete with extended pinky finger.[256] These codified movements are interspersed with uncodified mimicry of other actions like jogging with pumping arms. Chan doesn't describe or name any of the particular mudras used in the dance; she only performs them while singing the lines from the "Do Re Mi" song. The video therefore does not attempt to teach the specificities of Kathak's gestural vocabulary or explain how these movements are used in

[254] "Dancing to South Asian Rhythms." *Arts Professional,* https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/318/case-study/dancing-south-asian-rhythms. Accessed February 23, 2019.
[255] "Easy Cardiovascular | Mudra Dance." *YouTube,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUFjqV10NXA . Accessed February 23, 2019.
[256] The corroborating lyrics are "Doe, a deer, a female deer / Sew, a needle pulling thread / Tea, a drink with jam and bread."

traditional performances of the dance, nor does it engage with a discourse of heritage and Indian authenticity by going on about the connection of hand gestures to the *Natya Sastra* text of yore. The video only introduces the idea of hand gestures as beneficial to the development of the minor limbs, then launches directly into a choreography that another person can copy by watching. The focus is entirely on the new piece of movement developed specifically for an elderly British audience, with Kathak deployed almost surreptitiously as a useful tool in that process.

In two other videos, presenters break down footwork techniques of Kathak as part of lower-body exercise routines. Jane Chan and another Kathak dancer, Rachel Waterman, again dressed in minimalist Indian clothing against a plain white backdrop, instruct viewers in how to stand or sit with the feet in a soft V-shape, and how to tap their toes, heels, and whole foot along to *teen taal*, the 16-beat time cycle.[257] Beyond brief descriptions of the ghungroo, ankle bells, they are wearing and mentions of how footwork is a key element to Kathak dance, these videos do not attempt to teach the viewer about Kathak. Instead, Kathak footwork techniques are described in a language of cardiovascular exercise and joint articulation. Seated footwork and standing footwork are both presented as options for differently abled individuals, centering the needs and abilities of the target audience over the normative practice of Kathak.

This sidelining of the specificities of Kathak and the decentering of Indian culture in the process of creating these works for older adults is a conscious decision by Akādemi. As Kaushik puts it, "When you go out to work with [...] ordinary communities, you don't pretend to teach them Indian dance. But Indian dance becomes a larger resource for us to create activities which

[257] "Warm up | Tatkar exercise." *YouTube*, uploaded by AkademiSouthAsianDan, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLl40QVOTwI&t=32s. Accessed February 23, 2019. "Cardiovascular | Toe heel steps." *YouTube*, uploaded by AkademiSouthAsianDan, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvADaWJ1S3Y. Accessed February 23, 2019.

are relevant to the lives of the people" (Kaushik, interview with the author, 2015). The decision to pursue connection and relevance through flexible deployments of Kathak techniques over the propagation of one kind of fixed Kathak allows Akādemi to engage with a much wider population of potential practitioners. One Dance Well participant, and elderly white woman named Brenda Shilito, underscored the importance of this wide approach: "Everything was inclusive. By that I mean mobility, or people's lack of mobility, or age, gender. There were no divisions at all, it was all inclusive. Everybody was made to feel comfortable. You weren't made to feel the odd one out in any which way."[258]

Through Dance Well, Akādemi created a pathway for Kathak and other Indian dances to be relevant to a very new audience. By isolating particular Kathak techniques and presenting them in a whole new light, Akādemi reshaped the dance into a locally accessible tool for health and wellness rather than a community-specific expression of cultural identity, and the local government took notice. "We've been funded by, interestingly, non-arts sources, which is quite groundbreaking for a small dance company in London, to be funded directly by an adult social care part of the bureaucratic system," said Akādemi education consultant Christina Christou.[259] "We were the first company in the U.K. to get direct funding for dance and dementia from a local authority [...] so interestingly, the work that we're doing has very much resonated with a lot of social policy and health policy" (ibid).

I am not suggesting that, through the Dance Well program, Akādemi has totally rent Kathak from its Indian identity and refined the dance to a collection of alienated, acultural movement exercises. Rather, I have attempted to show how Akādemi carefully de-centered

[258] "Dance Well health benefits by Akādemi." *YouTube*, uploaded by AkademiSouthAsianDan, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdBCTgc2tas. Accessed February 23, 2019.
[259] Christou, Christina. Personal interview. August 11, 2015.

cultural identity in their Dance Well presentation of Kathak as part of a project to universalize the dance around a mission of health and wellness for elderly Brits irrespective of cultural background and dance experience. Kathak's identity as a classical Indian dance is present, but relegated to the background. What is foregrounded is the accessibility and new relevance of Kathak techniques for a new audience.

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In this section, I have illustrated an alternate conception of Kathak dance that exceeds Indian nationalist identifications. I've focused on three examples of this non-nationalist or more-than-nationalist conception: Kathak works that focus on individual creative expression, Kathak works that attempt to universalize the dance through an engagement with accessible systems like rhythm that underline cross-cultural similarities with other forms like tap and jazz, and Kathak programming that reframes the dance as a neutral and adaptable tool for health and wellness. While there are many more examples one could look at that showcase non-nationalist framings of Kathak in the Indian diaspora, these three cases are useful because they exemplify the flexibility of Kathak 1) at an individual level, 2) at a macro level, and 3) in a non-arts context.

While this section focused on how Kathak can exceed nationalist framings, the next section will showcase how dancers and institutions engage with nationally-relevant cultural spaces through another technique of integrative model Kathak: the production of site-specific work.

SECTION III: Claiming Space

On the evening of May 24, 2017, I was speed-walking from my apartment in Farringdon to the Southbank Center. I had been making the trip through Fleet Street and across Waterloo Bridge almost every day for ten days to attend events at the annual Alchemy Festival of South Asian art and culture in the U.K. Centered at the Southbank Center, London's largest public art complex, Alchemy is a veritable takeover of performance art, visual art, material art, lectures, classes, and bazaars featuring arts, artists, food, and merchandise from South Asia and the South Asian community in the U.K. From the proscenium stage in Royal Festival Hall to the communal ballroom space in the Center's main lobby, every nook and cranny of the complex was dedicated to diasporic South Asian culture during the festival.

On this day, I arrived at the front desk to retrieve my ticket for *Paradiso: Man's Enduring Search for Perfection*. Instead of having a specific venue printed onto the ticket, it merely said "Meeting Point: Ticket Desk on Level 2." At the designated meeting point, ushers led small groups of audience members through a series of hallways, elevators, and side rooms until we reached the final narrow staircase. It was rickety and made of steel, clearly meant for operations use only. Emerging into the sunlight, we found ourselves on the roof of Royal Festival Hall. HVAC pipes took up half of the space; the other half was filled with chairs surrounding a large chalk circle drawn on the ground. Spreading out around us in all directions was London as it appears on postcards: the Houses of Parliament, the Thames, the London Eye, the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral were all resplendent in the early evening light. This was the backdrop for *Paradiso: Man's Enduring Search for Perfection*, a mixed technique choreography featuring Kathak and commissioned by Akādemi. Here, literally on top one of the most

significant cultural institutions in London with the rest of the city at our feet, we watched a new vision of South Asian dance.

In "Choreographing Heritage, Performing the Site," Alessandra Lopez y Royo describes how performances of dance and enactments of religious rituals at heritage sites like archaeological landmarks can be used to articulate certain kinds of self-perception and myths of cultural continuity.[260] She describes how these "rituals of heritage" are often performances of commissioned state art; as such, they "reflect the nation's self-image and use the past to suit contemporary political needs. Though principally aimed at tourist consumption of the site, choreography becomes here an important metaphor for how heritage is imagined and a ritual expression of this imagining" (Lopez y Royo, 4). While Lopez y Royo's work in this particular article focuses on the performance of cultural dances and religious rituals at temples across Southeast Asia, there is a well-documented trend of performing Indian classical dance at historical heritage sites or reproductions of such sites. Kathak, for example, is performed often at historical sites such as the Taj Mahal in Agra, the Hawa Mahal in Jaipur, the temples in Khajuraho, and the Qutub Minar in Delhi,[261] or performed on generic stages with images of these iconic sites projected onto the backdrop. Kathak on the silver screen is often portrayed in similar settings meant to evoke another time and place, usually of the Mughal court or of the salons (*mehfils)* of the courtesan (some examples include films like *Mughal-e-Azam, Umrao Jaan*, *Shatranj ki Khiladi*, *Devdas*, *Jalsaghar*). According to Lopez y Royo, performing heritage dances at heritage sites is a popular practice because it promotes a sense of historical continuity that is desirable:

[260] Lopez y Royo, Alessandra. "Choreographing Heritage, Performing Site." *School of Oriental and African Studies*. https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/69/1/Lopez_.pdf . Accessed February 27, 2019.
[261] Some of these locations have been the site of regular classical music and dance festivals, while others are frequently used for photo and video shoots that circulate online.

> the main point is to make people feel that these sites and the past they represent are part of the nation's heritage, and that there is an unbroken continuity of tradition, reinforcing the notion of a timeless Asian culture, with all that is implied—including the marketing of such an image in the West, again to increase tourism. There is a tendency to present tradition as unbroken, glossing over glaring gaps and breaks in that imagined continuity (Lopez y Royo, 4).

When it comes to the question of cultivating a diasporic identity that exceeds the "nation's self image," I am interested in the flip side of Lopez y Royo's inquiry (ibid). What happens when so-called heritage dancers take over *non-traditional* spaces? How can myths of continuity, difference, hegemonic cultural identities be *disrupted* through the use of space in new dance works?

One of the main thrusts of Akādemi's dance production work has been to regularly bring classical Indian dances like Kathak into iconic British spaces: "from shopping centres and care homes to Buckingham Palace and Trafalgar Square, [Akādemi's] performances redefine audience relationships with public spaces and landmarks."[262] Over the last thirty years, Akādemi has commissioned site-specific performances of Indian classical dance, including Kathak, for spaces such as Trafalgar Square, the fountain courtyard of Somerset House, and the public walkways of the South Bank Center and Royal Festival Hall.[263] The organization has always sought to avoid what one dance teacher called "the ghettoization of Indian dance," in which classical dances like Kathak are performed mainly for Indian audiences in enclaved Indian spaces like temples or community centers like the Bhavan (Sushma Mehta, interview with the author, 2015). Dancers and dance organizers present at *Navadisha: New Dynamics in South Asian Dance*, an international conference organized by a handful of South Asian dance

[262] "Performance." *Akādemi,* https://Akādemi .co.uk/performance. Accessed February 24, 2019.
[263] Akādemi is not the only Indian dance institution engaging with British public spaces. The arts organization Sampad and Kathak dancer Sonia Sabri, among others, have created works that engage with and interrogate the relationship between Indian dances and iconic British spaces. Akādemi, however, has been the most consistent in terms of commissioning site-specific works of a spectacular scale as part of their mission statement.

institutions in the U.K. including Akādemi in 2016, agreed that outdoor performances open up the opportunity for reclaiming and reinterpreting landmarks through a postcolonial lens, as well as the opportunity for a broader and more transformative audience experience.[264] As one speaker at the conference put it, "site dance allows us to challenge publicly the boxed others want to place us in or define us by [...] South Asian dance has now made itself at home everywhere—on bridges and under bridges, in town squares and in rivers, in stately homes and swimming pools" (Navadisha 2016, 35).

Bridging this idea of being "at home" with Lopez y Royo's description of how site-specific performance shapes national self-perception, I argue that part of an integrative model approach to Kathak dance includes a radical reframing of the perception of Kathak through the insertion of Kathak into British national spaces. Efforts to make dances like Kathak "at home everywhere" is not merely an attempt to increase viewership just for the sake of it. Rather, claiming space through dances like Kathak is a political act that disrupts binary notions of identity, otherness, and belonging.

Bells: Third Space or Spectacle?

One explicit example of Akādemi's efforts to align Kathak with British identity through the strategic infiltration of iconic British spaces is the 2007 production of *Bells*. A collaboration between Kathak artists and aerialists from Belgian group Theatre Tol, *Bells* was commissioned by the Mayor of London for the annual Trafalgar Square Festival. In 2007, the free festival was part of a London-wide *India Now* initiative that arranged a number of performances, film premieres, exhibitions, and other showcases of Indian culture in the city to mark London's

[264] *Navadisha: International Dance Conference Report.* London: Akādemi, 2016.

growing engagement with India. *India Now* was essentially a tourism initiative, organized by India's Tourism Ministry together with the Mayor of London's office.[265] Then-mayor of London Ken Livingstone contextualized the festival as a chance for Londoners "to see what India has to offer from its past and what it has to offer for the future. India represents the future."[266]

This future-facing framing of Indian culture set the stage for famed Kathak artist Kumudini Lakhia's choreography of *Bells*, arranged by British-based Kathak artists Urja Desai Thakore and Amina Khayyam. The piece featured eight British-based Kathak dancers, many of non-South Asian descent,[267] occupying a large circular space in the center of Trafalgar Square. The dance was specially choreographed for Trafalgar Square, though smaller-scale iterations of the work were performed in other spaces in the years after its premiere. It was performed in the evening, with streetlights beaming and cars whizzing by in the background. Lakhia's choreography broke down the traditional binary of front-facing stillness and swiftness in Kathak dance to instead focus on its potential to traverse space, restlessly and relentlessly.[268] Dancers moved constantly, creating new geometric patterns, tracing tangled paths, and engaging with Kathak's circularity through cyclical movements of departure and return. The highlight of the choreography was the nature of its transitions and how those transitions enabled the dancers to move through and occupy the space fully. This is a notable departure from the usual emphasis on the crescendo to and execution of *sum* poses that emphasize abrupt, statuesque stillness in both the dance and the music.

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[265] "'India Now' Tourism Festival Begins in London." *Pratiyogita Darpan*, September 27, 2007, pg. 393.
[266] "Floating Taj Mahal starts London's India Now fest." *Reuters*, https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-india-festival/floating-taj-mahal-starts-londons-india-now-fest-idUKL1783818220070717. Accessed March 1, 2019.
[267] The significance of non-South Asian Kathak bodies in Akādemi's work will be discussed in the next section.
[268] In this section it is not my intention to provide a detailed movement analysis of *Bells*; instead, I am focusing on the 2007 performance in Trafalgar Square first and foremost as an occupation of a public space.

I would say that in *Bells*, the dancers are not merely performing a dance in Trafalgar Square. Rather, they are actively negotiating that space both physically and metaphorically as cultural interlocutors, inscribing British Indian hybridity through a marriage between Kathak and Trafalgar Square. They are activating Trafalgar Square, a "centre of national democracy and protest"[269] in London, as diasporic space. The square is the site of a huge number of culturally significant British events, from Christmas ceremonies to anti-war protests. It is alive with contemporary social relevance through the bodies that occupy and mold the space, juxtaposed against static but towering nationalist imagery.[270] Through their performance of diaspora, the dancers of *Bells* recast Trafalgar Square as a third space, a site where new kinds of British Asian realities can unfold.[271]

The 45-minute choreography of *Bells* supports this effort in its emphasis on passage and return, transitions that traverse the space in sweeps and darts, and arrangements that bring the dancers in conversation with each other, with the audience, with the four corners of the plaza, and with the sky above. Kathak in *Bells* is not transformed in any particularly groundbreaking way—the signature abhinaya techniques and nritta compositions are all there, performed in traditional outfits against a typical cyclical musical score. It is the unique *union* of Kathak and the space of Trafalgar Square that makes *Bells* a transformative experience of Indian classical dance in its new home. It both ruptures the myth of Kathak's essential Indianness and inserts the dance into Trafalgar Square's history as the center of British cultural life.

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[269] "Trafalgar Square." *Mayor of London*, Greater London Authority, https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/our-building-and-squares/trafalgar-square. Accessed March 1, 2019.

[270] The centerpiece of Trafalgar Square is Nelson's Column, commemorating Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson who led the British navy to victory against Napoleon at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. Four colossal lions face the column and act as Nelson's guards. Three plinths in the square feature statues of other British national figures including King George IV, Sir Charles James Napier, and Sir Henry Havelock, who in fact was deeply involved in quelling rebellions in colonial India during the 1850s. A fourth plinth in the square is reserved for rotating contemporary art works, an attempt to maintain some contemporary representation in the square's installations.

[271] Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2012.

However, it cannot be ignored that *Bells* relies on an element of spectacle that threatens its power as political act. While the Kathak dancers were clothed in relatively plain and monotone costumes, the flashing lights, smoke machine, and heavily costumed aerialists from Theatre Tol who were lifted into the sky by a crane halfway through the program turned *Bells* into a visual extravaganza so over-stimulating that it lost some of its socially relevant edge. This is the balancing act Akādemi faces: how to reimagine British public spaces through Indian dance without once again framing the dances in terms of the fantastic, the spectacular, the Other, a framing that also positions audience members as passive consumers. I don't presume to have an answer to this question. Rather, I am using the example of *Bells* to show how cultural institutions and dance practitioners must continually negotiate these opportunities and pitfalls when it comes to strategizing around new ways of projecting diasporic identity.

En Route: From Calcutta to California

On April 9, 2016, the Leela Dance Collective presented a short program of traditional Kathak repertoire at Union Station in Los Angeles, the central train and subway station in the heart of downtown. Union Station is a landmark in Los Angeles—in fact, it was designated as a Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument in 1972 and was eventually added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1980.[272] Built in what became known as the "Mission Moderne" style of architecture that mashed together the Spanish colonial and Art Deco styles popular in Californian in the 1930s when the station was constructed, Union Station features a vast waiting room with high coffered ceilings, 40-foot-tall windows, chandeliers, and patterned marble

[272] "History." *Union Station LA,* https://www.unionstationla.com/history. Accessed April 1, 2019.

flooring. Thousands of people travel through this room every day, some passing the entire day away in the deep leather couches.

Titled *En Route: From Calcutta to California*, Leela's program seemed to center the diasporic position of Kathak dance as both Indian and Californian. In the advertising for the program one can see the desire to capitalize on the authenticity politics of Kathak as an Indian treasure, balanced against the need for Leela to plant its feet in the U.S.: "Take a journey with Leela Dance from ancient to modern times, across the seas from India to America, through the cities of Lucknow and Jaipur, as the history and evolution of one of India's most alluring dance traditions - Kathak - comes to life in this scintillating performance."[273] The effect is a message that mixes both heritage model and integrative model values in the framing of Kathak as *both* an Indian dance of the past and a cultural product of the Indian diaspora in the U.S..

Rather that featuring one site-specific work the way *Bells* did, *En Route* was a short program that included a handful of pieces from traditional Kathak repertoire. Unlike *Bells*, *En Route* did not seem specifically designed for Union Station. The dancers performed in a small, sectioned-off portion of the waiting room floor that was separated from the rest of the space by velvet ropes. Chairs were set up for the audience facing the "stage" space, mimicking the unidirectional layout of proscenium theaters. These chairs were also sectioned off, and audience members had to pay for tickets to sit down and formally join the audience. While dancers were still comfortably visible to anyone passing through or sitting in other parts of the waiting room, the dance was not performed in the round. Choreography was front-facing and primarily engaged the paying audience, made up mostly of Indian-Americans from Leela's own social network.

[273] "From Calcutta to California." Event page. *Facebook*, April 6, 2016, 12:57 p.m., https://www.facebook.com/LeelaDanceCollective/photos/gm.609356609213734/1198846533460170/?type=3&theater

I would suggest that this kind of setup did not reformulate the space of Union Station as a site for diasporic expressions of mixed identity. Instead, the dancers simply ornamented the space, providing entertainment and momentary diversion for passersby while catering primarily towards an Indian audience. The physical confinement of the stage space and the whips of different colors created by the dazzling costumes in the mostly brown room evoked a sense of exotic difference rather than a marriage between dance and space. In *En Route*, the dancers seemed both singled out and sidelined. Commuters walked past the performance, glancing briefly at the dancers and continuing on their way. If Union Station is indeed the place "where Los Angeles begins,"[274] then this program gave the impression of a city where cultural difference is sectioned off, controlled, and available for superficial consumption.

I must add here that this Kathak program was organized by Art Adventures LA, a for-profit company that arranges customized tours and art experiences for paying customers. Headed by an Indian American woman named Meena Pennington, Art Adventures LA promises "unconventional" art experiences for visitors who are "not looking for an art history lecture but would like to have some interesting take-aways."[275] It is not my interest in this dissertation to parse out the role of such tourist industry companies in proliferating static notions of culture and identity[276]; rather, I wish to highlight Leela's engagement with this company as part of their ongoing negotiation of identity, visibility, and accessibility in Los Angeles. Part of my argument in this dissertation is that Kathak dancers and institutions do not fall neatly into heritage model or integrative model categories, and cannot be wholly described as progressive or conservative,

[274] "Home." *Union Station LA*, https://www.unionstationla.com/. Accessed April 1, 2019.
[275] "About." *Art Adventures LA*, http://www.artadventures.la/about. Accessed April 1, 2019.
[276] One such example would be the Incredible India tourist campaign run by the government of India to attract international tourism. This campaign has hosted innumerable classical dance and music events as part of a campaign to cast India as a consumer-ready site of ancient culture and authentic spirituality. See Kerrigan et al (2012) and Geary (2013) for a critical analysis of this campaign and its effect on India's international image.

nationalist or non-nationalist, etc. Instead, I wish to point out that certain techniques exist that I argue can help support an integrative mission of weaving Kathak into a cultural fabric that exceeds Indian nationalist labels—one of those techniques is the performance of Kathak in public spaces. But I also seek to complicate the idea that Kathak performances in locally relevant public spaces automatically reformulates the relationship between Indian, American, and British identity categories by pointing out how Leela's performance at an iconic space like Union Station fails to disrupt the othering of Kathak and Kathak dancers in the diaspora. Factors like staging, choreography, and admission fees matter in the act of claiming space.

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Returning to the roof of Royal Festival Hall in the year 2017: *Paradiso* is another in Akādemi's long line of outdoor performances meant to bring dances like Kathak into non-traditional spaces loaded with British national significance. Similar to *Bells*, *Paradiso* features a mixed-race cast of Indians and non-Indians. In this next section, I wish to dive deeper into another strategy used by both Akādemi and the Leela Institute to bring Kathak into British and American national culture, respectively: the alignment of Kathak with non-Indian bodies and non-Indian techniques and aesthetics.

SECTION IV: Mixed Bodies, Techniques and Aesthetics in the "Neutral Universal"

In her critique of the "South Asian label" as a homogenizing construct in the context of British cultural production, Avanthi Meduri draws attention to Akādemi's large-scale

productions of Indian classical dance that include dancers from many ethnic and artistic backgrounds.[277] She points to how "individual identity, history and biography of immigrant or British/Indian/South Asian dancers performing in these spectacles are transcended, and gathered into the folds of the overarching South Asian Dance label and choreographic insignia under which they are staged. But who, in fact, is at home on this world stage?" (Meduri 2008, 236). In this section, I will explore how both Akādemi and the Leela Institute invest in a type of Kathak dance that attempts to transcend the specificities of identity in two ways: by normalizing the performance of Kathak on non-Indian bodies, and by normalizing the engagement of Kathak with non-Indian performance techniques and aesthetics. This normalization is premised on an idea of Kathak on a certain kind of world stage, a diaspora stage that can complicate the fixities of national identity.

The Leela Institute's main performing body—the Leela Dance Collective—is made up of a core group of five principal artists. Three of them are of Indian descent, one is white, and one of is of Chinese and Japanese descent. The mix of ethnicities represented in the collective is consistent with the multi-ethnic legacy of the Collective's antecedent, the Chitresh Das Dance Company (CDDC). The CDDC grew out of Das' students from San Francisco State University and other classes he taught in and around the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1980s and 1990s. I offer this lineage because I wish to point out that the Leela Collective has roots in a guru-sister community that formed largely in university settings. This is unusual in the U.S., where most Kathak practice happens in community centers, private studios, and family homes rooted in the Indian diasporic network. The university setting opened Das' Kathak practice to a much broader

[277] Meduri, Avanthi. "Labels, histories, politics: Indian/South Asian dance on the global stage." *Dance Research* 26.2 (2008): 223-243.

group of students and created an environment where non-Indian practitioners of Kathak could train, develop, and rise up to a professional level. Training for many of these women began in their 20s, much later that most Kathak students in the U.S. who grow up with the dance as part of their Indian upbringing. I would suggest that learning Kathak later in life, in a setting like a university, minimizes some of the essentializing ties to Indian heritage that the dance is loaded with in community-based classes aimed largely at the children of diasporic subjects, particularly recent immigrants. The CDDC became one of the few places in the U.S. where non-Indian Kathak dancers were consistently visible and valued as bearers of the form. After the dissolution of the company, many of these non-Indian Kathak dancers continued on to successful careers as soloists and teachers across the U.S. Some of them went on to help found the Leela Collective based in LA, and continue to be a presence in the Kathak field in that city.

I suggest that the mere presence of highly skilled, highly visible non-Indian Kathak artists on stages in the U.S. disrupts perceptions of Kathak as an essentially Indian dance. Whatever Indian nationalist or heritage model discourse may be circulated by the Leela Collective through its choreographies and rhetoric, I would argue that the consistent and significant contributions and presence of non-Indian dancers transforms the identity of the dance in a foundational way. It normalizes Kathak as a locally relevant dance form in the new context of the U.S., without alienating the form from its Indian history. When Seibi Lee,[278] a Kathak dancer of Chinese and Japanese descent, performs the lead role of the monkey god Hanuman in *Son of the Wind*, the Leela Collective's retelling of the Ramayana, she is not erasing Kathak's connection to India. Rather, she is underscoring Kathak's flexibility and foundational interpretive qualities by

[278] Lee has also been recognized as a "Master Artist" in Kathak by the Alliance for California Traditional Arts, the state's official partner in folk and traditional arts development, suggesting that formal agencies at the state level are beginning to separate racial background from their conception of cultural practice.

showing how the portrayal of epic characters exceeds real-life identifications like Indian and non-Indian. The fact that Lee's presence as a non-Indian lead character in *Son of the Wind* was noted in some reviews and news articles about the show suggests that the presence of non-Indian Kathak dancers at that caliber is still surprising to many viewers.[279] By merely continuing to present Kathak choreographies, even hyper-traditional choreographies, through both Indian and non-Indian bodies, the Leela Collective is engaging in an integrative model iteration of Kathak that renounces the "strategic essentialism" of the heritage model (Spivak 1996).

In the British context, there is a much more documented debate around the ethnic or national identification of practitioners of Indian dances; as one of the most visible and large-scale production houses in the U.K., Akādemi has been at the forefront of these debates. As Andrée Grau noted in her 2001 report on status of South Asian dance in the U.K.: "Throughout its existence, Akādemi has seen itself as a part of a British mainstream. It has never pushed 'political correctness,' for example, to the point that only individuals of South Asian descent can talk about, perform and/or promote South Asian dance. Whenever Akādemi has recognised excellence, it has supported it."[280] What Grau is describing is a kind of organized democratization of these dances on the basis of technique, rather than on the privileging of lineage or ties to India as it happens at places like the Bhavan. Kaushik herself describes Kathak as first and foremost an international art form that simply originated in India (Kaushik, interview

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[279] "All you wanted to know about classical dance." *The Hindu*, https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/dance/all-you-wanted-to-know-about-classical-dance/article26030838.ece. Accessed February 18, 2019.
"Epic Tale from the Ancient Indian Ramayan Takes Flight in San Francisco." *KQED*, https://www.kqed.org/arts/13828723/epic-tale-from-the-ancient-indian-ramayan-takes-flight-in-san-francisco. Accessed February 18, 2019.
"Bhramara Festival of Dance - A unique festival of classical dance to enthral Mumbai!" *DNA India,* https://www.dnaindia.com/entertainment/report-bhramara-festival-of-dance-a-unique-festival-of-classical-dance-to-enthral-mumbai-2709156. Accessed February 18, 2019.

[280] Grau, Andrée, and F. I. Chor. "South Asian Dance in Britain: negotiating cultural identity through dance (SADiB)." *Unpublished report, Leverhulme Research Grant* (2002).

with the author, 2015). As such, dancers who get involved with Akādemi are evaluated on (the institution's definition of) technical skill rather than their authenticity as Indian representatives. "It's survival of the fittest," said Kaushik. "So, you have to be bloody good in your technique."

Bells was one such example of the democratization of technique at work. As Gorringe put it at the *Navadisha* dance conference,

> Watching the performances, a whole variety of ignorant and prejudiced assumptions are turned on their head. For example, 'Indian dance is for Indians'. Akādemi's piece Bells resoundingly undercuts this idea by presenting a group of highly trained Kathak dancers, whose origins include Britain, Bangladesh, the Caribbean, Finland and Japan. As Mira Kaushik commented, if anyone wanted evidence of the transnationalism of Kathak, it was here, in Bells (Navadisha 2016, 35).

Bells dancer Archita Kumar, of Indian descent, remarked that it was always Akādemi's vision to set Kathak apart from "community art" by including non-Indian dancers and presenting works in non-traditional spaces.[281] Kumar grew up in Kathak at the Bhavan, where she absorbed the notion of Kathak as part of her essential Indianness. But after more than a decade of affiliation with Akādemi projects, Kumar reflected on how engaging with difference through Kathak practice as an Akādemi dancer changed her own perception of Kathak's relationship to Indian identity:

> I think I did feel like Kathak makes me feel like an Indian woman [...] now I don't feel the cultural identity being so fixed with the dance form. For me, now, I see Kathak as just a kind of movement. It's a tool, it's a language that I can communicate with, and that is it. I feel like I can find myself now, when I'm dancing Kathak. I think earlier when I would feel like when I go on stage and I do Kathak I am becoming an Indian classical dancer. And then the minute I come offstage, I might have a personality switch. Whereas now I feel like I can take my own personality onstage. [Kathak] is like a piece of clothing I can wear and feel comfortable in (Kumar, interview with the author, 2017).

The metaphor of wearing Kathak like an article of clothing coming from an Indian Kathak dancer is a significant indicator of how Akādemi has succeeded in decentering Indian national

[281] Kumar, Archita. Personal interview. May 29, 2017.

identity from the dance form. The idea of Kathak as a set of techniques and aesthetics that can be alienated from the individual stands in direct opposition to some of the comments made by dancers at the Bhavan who invested in a conception of Kathak as inalienable to Indian identity.

Thinking of Kathak as simply a type of dance rather than a necessarily *Indian* type of dance opens the door to the engagement of Kathak with not only non-Indian bodies, but with techniques of performance and staging that draw from the West. Kumar notes that at Akādemi,

> the way in which [Kathak] was presented, whether it was how you use the light, how you enter and exit, how you program it, there was always this encouragement to think in a more contemporary sense. I think because so that it sets it apart from being a community dance. For years and years of growing up training at the Bhavan and seeing Bhavan performances, there wasn't so much of an emphasis on [...] the aspects around the dance. It was just about the presentation of the repertoire. I feel that's important, because that's what you see when you go to the West End, or when you watch mainstream contemporary dance or ballet or whatever. So, in that sense they were trying to bring it on par so people view it at that level and don't view it as community dance that just happens to be happening at a central London venue (Kumar, interview with the author, 2017).

The focus on staging and presentation that fashionably conforms to Western aesthetics and expectations is certainly a strategy to gain recognition in mainstream culture, but it's also a symptom of systemic pressure to "create new, different, never-seen-before work, to experiment with hybridity, to break boundaries, bowing to western modernist and postmodernist aesthetics that seem to reign unchallenged" (Meduri 2008, 236).

In Akādemi's work, bringing Kathak into what they call "the mainstream" has often meant aligning it with "contemporary" dance in the Euro-American sense. "The location of dancing at the intersection of particular and broader appeal," which I argue is at the center of Akādemi's mission, "has meant that dancing bodies are constantly circulating within circuits of meaning-making and cultural power, and are quite often deployed to operate within these circuits

to accomplish particular political goals," according to Ananya Chatterjea.[282] Akādemi's production of *Paradiso*, staged on the roof of Royal Festival Hall, is one complex example of the institution's sometimes problematic attempts to restage Kathak outside of the confines of Indian community halls, both literally and metaphorically, by engaging within certain Western imperialist legacies of cultural power. Choreographed by Jose Agudo, a London-based dancer of Spanish descent who works in Flamenco, Kathak, and Western contemporary dance, *Paradiso* consists of a multi-ethnic cast purportedly representing a mixture of contemporary and classical training. However, as the piece unfolded it became obvious that *Paradiso* was a Western contemporary dance work sprinkled with classical Indian elements, rather than a rigorous or critical innovation of classical Indian dance itself. It was the logical fulfillment of an audition process that sought after "contemporary dancers with South Asian dance experience,"[283] instead of calling for Indian classical dancers with contemporary dance experience, as a few Kathak dancers bemoaned to me.[284]

The premise was a retelling of the third act from Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, in which Dante's lover Beatrice guides him through a sea of human struggles against vanity, ambition,

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[282] Chatterjea, Ananya. "On the Value of Mistranslations and Contaminations: The Category of "Contemporary Choreography" in Asian Dance." *Dance Research Journal* 45.1 (2013): 7-21

[283] These sources requested anonymity.

[284] Both Susan Foster and Anusha Kedhar have described the push for cross-trained dancers in the global dance marketplace as part of the development of new types of dancing bodies, what Foster calls the "hired body" and Kedhar calls the "flexible" body. In her study of dance as transnational labor, Kedhar write that "dancers learn contemporary dance and ballet to make themselves more accessible to mainstream audiences and more marketable to different dance companies. They market themselves as culturally different but socially integrated, flexibly moving between familiarity and otherness to meet the ever-shifting and unpredictable demands of working as dancers in the U.K. Through a range of flexible bodily practices, they were able to accumulate power and capital within an unstable, uneven, and uncertain global [dance] economy," (Kedhar 2014, 37). As described in the introduction to this dissertation, I am focusing less on cross-trained bodies and more on dancers who identify primarily as Kathak dancers who are navigating a dance field in which they must compete with cross-trained dancers. These Kathak dancers contend with the real-life implications of Kedhar's alternate theory of flexibility that is about the ability/expectation of a single dancer to embody multiple movement genres, a theory that occludes or sidelines Kathak's innate flexibility.

aggression, and desire, culminating in his enlightenment.[285] Cast as the austere, authentic, and unmoved Beatrice figure who knowingly guides Dante through the twists and turns of human life, Kumar is the only dancer to recognizably remain in a classical Indian form. She describes her part in *Paradiso* as "movement inspired by Kathak," not actual Kathak (Kumar, interview with the author, 2017).[286] But unlike the other dancers, Kumar does not engage with floorwork or lifts, nor does she express the extreme athleticism of the other dancers who leap, roll, and fight each other across the space. She does not embody any of the technical markers of contemporary concert dance—release technique, contact improvisation, floor work, modern dance techniques, or ballet[287]—that the other dancers engage with. Kumar is pointedly apart from all that, often exiting the performance space to watch the other dancers engage in passionate acrobatic sequences, and reentering it to lead the rest of the cast in markedly more controlled "South Asian" movements that usually revolve around the use of Indian classical hasta/mudras, or hand gestures. Kathak in this choreography is stalwart, original, timeless, different. Kumar is untouched by the dancers around her, her lines and her body markedly rigid in their adherence to Kathak tradition as compared to the other dancers. As the stoic sage cast against the ungodly and dynamic contemporary dancers, she retains a clear distance from the rest of the cast in terms of both space and vocabulary.

Though Akādemi claims that *Paradiso* "demonstrates Akādemi's commitment to investigating new ways of choreographing and integrating contemporary British and Indian dance practices […] [illustrating] how British Indian dance remains integral to the U.K. dance

[285] Program notes for *Paradiso: Man's Enduring Search for Perfection* at Royal Festival Hall, London. Akādemi, 2017.
[286] For Kumar, the fact that she wore shoes during the performance eliminated any meaningful use of her lower body, causing her to, in her opinion, lose access to 50% of the form and therefore rendering in her dance in *Paradiso* movement inspired by Kathak, instead of her perception of true Kathak (Kumar, interview with the author, 2017).
[287] Kwan, SanSan. "When Is Contemporary Dance?" *Dance Research Journal* 49.3 (2017): 38-52. Pg. 40.

scene and [...] challenging stereotypes and expectations of what Indian dance is/should be," the reality of the choreography positions Kathak on a different plane than Western contemporary dance (program notes). On this other plane, Kathak is framed in heritage model terms of essential difference in order to make a narrative point, reinforcing Orientalist notions of Indian dance along the way. The compartmentalized Kathak choreography in *Paradiso* begs the question:

> Can the occasional citing of a folded hand gesture, and the clearly visible difference of a body marked as Asian, overturn/ balance the general vocabulary/choreographic structure that emerges from Western modern/contemporary dance? […] What seems to be increasingly popular in the sphere of Asian 'contemporary' dance is a kind of ventriloquism, where contemporary Asia finds its voice through the signifiers of the Euro-American modern/postmodern, the latter passing once again as the neutral universal, which is able to contain all difference (Chatterjea 2013, 11).

I argue that in *Paradiso*, Akādemi is reinscribing the position of Kathak as peripheral to Western contemporary performance, remaining unchanged and austere against the tide of Western innovation. While Akādemi is trying to exploit the "ethnocentric bias" that yokes Euro-American identity to contemporary performance in order to slip Indian classical dance into that same ahistorical, universalist framework (Kwan 2017, 48), *Paradiso* fails to contemporize Kathak itself. If "the central feature of global culture today is the politics of the mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannibalize one another and thus to proclaim their successful hijacking of the twin Enlightenment ideas of the triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular" (Appadurai 1996, 27), then the effect of *Paradiso* is to frame Western contemporary dance as triumphantly universal and Kathak, and Kathak dancers, as resiliently particular.

However, one element that joins *Paradiso's* contemporary Western aspects and its iteration of Kathak is the "qualitative emphasis placed on emotive characterization," which Kwan notes as a key part of contemporary dance (Kwan 2017, 42). The main themes of

Paradiso—vice, struggle, search, redemption—are communicated through abstract and representational movement that is rich in rasic qualities. Unlike *Bells, Paradiso* is a piece of narrative storytelling not unlike traditional evening-length Kathak dance dramas, and all the dancers on stage share in the foundational commitment to evoking and circulating emotional experience. It is perhaps this communion between Kathak and Western contemporary dance through the joint development of rasa that guides Akādemi's work. They flex the emotive qualities of Kathak as the main entry point for Indian classical dance on contemporary British stages.

For Kumar herself, the experience of working on *Paradiso* burst open her existing notions of the positionality of Kathak in the British dance sector:

> Working with a cast of majority contemporary dancers, initially I felt completely out of my depth, and I thought I'm not as physically fit as these dancers, my body won't move in the same way. And I actually felt like my Kathak training was a huge disadvantage and I thought what I do was not really dance because I'm not moving my body as much. But then seeing it through their eyes, seeing how much they struggled with making mudras and how they really kind of appreciated the stillness and just a different aesthetic quality that we learn as Indian dancers. It just gave me so much value for what we do (Kumar, interview with the author, 2017).

In this example, what happens for dancers through the process of collaborating across genres cannot be accounted for through viewing the final choreography. While *Paradiso* as a choreography positioned Kathak as an Orientalist seasoning on top of Western contemporary dance, a very different exchange was happening behind the scenes, one that broke down hierarchies between forms rather than reinforcing them. I offer this critique of *Paradiso* to show how formations of diasporic Kathak dance can reinscribe difference through choreographic decisions on one hand, and transform fields of knowledge and power within the dancing community through new collaborations on the other hand. Akādemi negotiates these

potentialities with every commission proposal and every new production—the balance is struck differently each time.

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It is impossible to map the full breadth of techniques through which Kathak practitioners in London and Los Angeles attempt to reshape the identity of Kathak dance and dancers. Everything from small details about costuming and lighting to mega-narratives that spread through marketing and advocacy can be read as strategic decisions that impact how cultural identity is formulated through Kathak. I have focused on a few highly visible ways that significant institutions in London and Los Angeles have consciously deployed Kathak dance as part of their mission to enter a broader cultural consciousness. If, as Mehta put it, "Kathak dance belongs on world stages at the highest levels [and] we need to do something that is going to the art form forward in a big way,"[288] then integrative model techniques of Kathak dance production are vital if dancers are to inhabit transnational spaces as diasporic subjects. Part of that process is to "hit on all those points and those experiences which make dance audiences says 'Wow! That piece of Swan Lake was amazing!' We have all those parallels. That's what Akādemi really means [...] that finesses of the technique, finesse of the expression, finesse of the whole performance" (Kaushik, interview with the author, 2015).

I would interpret "finesse" in this description as the thoughtful strategizing around how to best present Kathak and Indian classical dance to a non-Indian audience in a manner that doesn't fall back on heritage model tropes of Indian essentialism that the audience may be primed for. It

[288] "The Industry Show Season 3 Episode 7 with Rina Mehta of Leela Dance Collective." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Industry Show, October 29, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZZux5LsmiY. Accessed February 18, 2019.

is a challenging mission. At its core is a tension between a desire for universality, and the reality of Western cultural hegemony positioned as the idealized "neutral universal" in the U.S. and the U.K. (Chatterjea 2013, 11).[289] Kaushik's reference to Swan Lake as an aspirational model hints at this hierarchy. While the strategies I've outlined in this chapter do have the effect, however variable, of decentering Indian national identity from Kathak practice and thus allowing the form to move into other socio-cultural spheres, they do not necessitate a critical engagement with the power of the West. This raises Chatterjea's important question:

> By placing this burden of accessibility on Asian bodies, is not the global stage rehearsing yet again the legacy of colonialism? If the global is indeed about the realignment of power, is it not time to undo 'the disproportionate influence of the West as a cultural forum, in all three senses of that word: as place of public exhibition and discussion, as a place of judgment, as a marketplace,' which Homi Bhabha lamented over two decades ago (1996, 31)? (Chatterjea 2013, 15).

As I described in the introduction to this chapter, I don't necessarily perceive of an integrative model of Kathak as primarily concerned with dismantling Western hegemony. Instead, I outline the integrative model as practice of Kathak that is concerned with un-yoking the dance form from fixed notions of Indian nationalism in order to gain legibility and value in the contexts of the U.S. and the U.K. as a diasporic subject/practice that can be folded into, rather than separated from, mainstream American and British culture. This method does not necessarily mandate a deconstruction of what it means to be American or British. Rather, it prioritizes inclusion into whatever those hegemonic categories are. The integrative model techniques

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[289] Chatterjea outlines this tension: "the opportunity to perform on such global fora and earn a place on the transnational touring circuit continues to be complicated. Such fora are in fact predicated on contradictory impulses. Sociologist Anna Tsing reminds us that 'universalism is implicated in both imperial schemes to control the world and liberatory mobilizations for justice and empowerment. Universalism inspires expansion—for both the powerful and the powerless' (2005, 9). So, even as we celebrate the obvious desegregation of the global stage to include 'other' aesthetics and bodies, and begin to operate on the basis of some kind of assurance that dance has universal appeal despite its cultural specificity, we have to remain vigilant to the dangers of unwritten conditions that undergird and asymmetricize the existence of such stages" (Chatterjea 2013, 9).

discussed in this chapter are deployed to *meet* "the disproportionate influence of the West," rather than overturn it (Bhabha 1996, 31).[290] Dancers and institutions engage with flexible choreographies of identification to infiltrate structures of knowledge and power that determine what it means to be British and/or American. The risk in this is evacuating Kathak of all its specificity in the act of mirroring the neutral universal of the West.

With all this in mind, it is clear that integrative model renderings of Kathak don't happen in a haphazard way. It takes a refinement of programming vision aimed at new audiences, and therefore new systems of patronage that reflect "new and constantly self-redefining social context(s)" (Meduri 2008, 236). Institutional leaders, choreographers, and dancers who wish to exceed heritage model iterations of Kathak are in a position to exploit "the incredible possibility of dance to create an encounter with difference on multiple levels, and to profoundly move audiences and alter their frames of reference" (Chatterjea 2013, 18). These agents must "remember that choices are political, that bodies come with histories and visual contracts, and that […] there is hardly any way to 'be free and just dance'" (Chatterjea 2013, 12). Akādemi says it another way, summarizing the risks inherent in new modelings of Kathak dance in diasporic settings:

> If we want South Asian art forms to be perceived, as they are, as forms with substance, not all as [...] 'song and dance' in bright colours with a smattering of mudras—then we need to be careful what we curate. Performances in public spaces have a huge potential—meaning that we have a proportionate responsibility in programming them. It is tempting when producing a site spectacular to put on a jolly splash of colour to Bollywood hits, with the odd hand gesture confirming to the public that what they are watching must be 'Indian classical dance'. But is that the image we want to project? It is easy to reinforce prejudices. It is much harder to disrupt them. (Navadisha 2016, 36).

[290] This is why I do not align the integrative model of Kathak dance with Royona Mitra's theory of new interculturalism, which is its own unique evaluation of diasporic Kathak practice in the U.K. While my integrative model of Kathak draws from Mitra's conception of "identity as a dynamic concept," it does not go as far as the new interculturalism model in refuting national identity categories in favor of "global/international drivers of difference" (Mitra 2014, 20).

Conclusion

Shifting Ground: Kathak as Political and Aesthetic Praxis

By 2045, the United States of America is projected to be a minority-majority country as the white population falls to below 50 percent.[291] Los Angeles is already a minority-majority city, with the Latinx population nearing majority status at 45.9 percent of the city's population.[292] In the United Kingdom, the white population holds a strong majority, though in the city of London that population is shrinking.[293] The distinct population shifts of each of these sites, coupled with the specificity of their different colonial legacies, influences the ways in which diasporic subjects navigate questions of identity.

However, shifts in population statistics alone do not overturn the epistemic fixity of national identity. What is more important than numerical evaluations of ethnic demographics are the hegemonic notions of what it means to be American and what it means to be British. As the U.S. shifts to minority-majority status, for instance, it is unlikely that diasporic populations will no longer need to contend with national systems of aestheticized multiculturalism and variegated citizenship that position them as "other" Americans, outside the mainstream, and contrary to the

[291] Frey, William H. "The US will become 'minority white' in 2045, Census projects." *The Brookings Institution*, March 14, 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/03/14/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-census-projects/. Accessed April 27, 2019.
[292] "Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin:2010." *United States Census Bureau.* https://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/DEC/10_SF1/QTP3/1600000US0644000. Accessed April 27, 2019.
[293] "Diversity in London," *Census Information Scheme*, June 2013. https://files.datapress.com/london/dataset/2011-census-diversity/2011-census-diversity-in-london.pdf. Accessed April 27, 2019.

norm.[294] Rather, I argue that strategies of identification and creative placemaking[295] through cultural production will remain as relevant as ever in the shifting realities of these two globalized countries. As Appadurai and others have shown, the development of transnational public spheres may contest the construct of the nation state, but fixed discourses of belonging, citizenship, and national identification remain powerful structuring forces. Official histories have been crafted to affirm singular national identities in the face of a rising non-white citizenry (Banerji 2002), and white supremacist constructions of "national culture" continue to sideline diasporic subjects even as these populations swell in numbers (Lowe 1996, Brah 1996). In this context it is useful to return to the understanding of the U.S. and the U.K. as diaspora spaces that are defined not by the empirical reality of minority or majority population breakdowns, but by the dominant *constructions* of identity and belonging that are created at the intersection of multiple axes of power, representation, structural violence, and personal narratives (Brah 1996). Considering these sites as diaspora spaces reminds us that heterogenous understandings and experiences of identity are always interpellated by discursive fixities.

This brings me back to my thesis: Indian diasporic subjects negotiate, contest, or, in some cases, strategically reinscribe fixed notions of identity through their practice of Kathak. These dancing subjects engage with the inherent flexibility of Kathak as part of a continual process of identity formation. I have shown how the methods through which subjects can explore, enact, and exceed certain identity positions are built into the practice of Kathak in the form of its

[294] Although interesting gray areas exist here; as I heard one colleague at the California Arts Council describe recently, there is an evolution happening between what is considered culturally specific expression and what is considered a civic event in the context of Chicano celebrations of Día de Los Muertos in the large Latinx community of Los Angeles.

[295] According to the National Endowment for the Arts, "in creative placemaking, partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities."
Markusen, Ann, and Anne Gadwa. "Creative Placemaking: Executive Summary," *National Endowment for the Arts*, 2010. https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf Accessed April 27, 2019.

foundational tenets of improvisation, creative interpretation, and transformative *riyaaz*. These tenets demand individualized expressions, facilitate multiple embodiments, and create pathways to transcendent experiences of selfhood. At the same time, these flexible tenets play out within structures of *taal* (rhythmic cycles) and *rasa* (the aesthetic theory of emotional communion) that demarcate the fixed edges of Kathak practice. The dance form is defined by the exercise of flexibility within these fixed structures.

Informed by this theorization of Kathak's flexibility, I have offered a close look at how the dance form has acted as a political and aesthetic praxis through which discursive frameworks of identity can be explored, negotiated, reinforced, and contested. I have worked from the position that

> the general cultural terrain is one social site in which 'hegemony' is continually being both established and contested [which] permits us to theorize about the roles that racialized immigrant groups play in the making and unmaking of culture and to explore the ways that cross-race and cross-national projects may work to change the existing structure of power, the current hegemony (Lowe 1996, 68).

Diasporic Kathak practice in my project is not neutral; rather, it is part of the making and unmaking of culture. I have shown how Kathak has morphed over the centuries in response to changing cultural, religious, and political trends in India, remaking itself at several turns. The classicization of Kathak in the post-independence era was a profound moment in which both the symbolic and the formal nature of Kathak was attached to a homogenized Indian national identity. This fixed iteration of Kathak on one level reveals the dance's inherent flexibility and its ability to be molded by changing conditions; on another level, it deeply entrenches a notion of singular cultural value that inhibits the flexible potential of the dance on multiple levels. Classicization was a conscious act of culture-making that challenged colonial structures of power

by shoring up an unequally hegemonic framework of cultural identity built around glorious Sanskritic origins.

> Looking back at classicization as an act of culture-making reminds us that
>
> > Culture is the terrain through which the individual speaks as a member of the contemporary national collectivity, but culture is also a mediation of history, the site through which the past returns and is remembered, however fragmented, imperfect, or disavowed. Through that remembering, that recomposition, new forms of subjectivity and community are thought and signified (Lowe 1996, x).

The act of recomposing the past as part of the development of cultural identities can take many different and sometimes contradictory forms. I have offered two models of diasporic Kathak practice that illustrate two overarching approaches to negotiating diasporic identity through the practice of Kathak. The heritage model of Kathak practice relies on investments in a singular Indian nationalist identity that echoes the discourse of classicization. As I've shown through the example of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in London and, in some instances, the Leela Institute for the Arts in Los Angeles, heritage model Kathak is fixed to Hinduism, to guru-shishya traditions that limit individual expressions in favor of imitation and recreation, and to a regime of affect that imbues Kathak with phantasmic but consequential connections to "authentic" Indianness. The heritage model relies on the demarcation of difference between Indian and non-Indian culture that simplifies diasporic positionality and frames Kathak as an enactment of inalienable Indian identity. While I have focused on critically deconstructing the ways in which a heritage model of Kathak dance rests on a problematic homogenization of Kathak dance history and practice as well as a singularization of diasporic Indian identity, it remains that the heritage model also enables significant communal power through the purposeful establishment of difference. Heritage model Kathak is a form of "strategic essentialism" in which Indian diasporic

subjects can benefit from the consolidated collective identity position and sense of belonging that an investment in fixity offers (Spivak, 1996).

On the other side of the coin is the integrative model, which I have defined as a practice of Kathak that positions the dance as a flexible tool through which individual diasporic subjects can exceed fixed conceptions of Indianness and assert their inclusion in the wider national cultures of the U.S. and the U.K. The integrative model as I've laid it out capitalizes on Kathak's in-built flexibility to open new pathways into the dance that invite both a diversity of individual expressions and a diversity of audiences and participants. Kathak in this model is unfixed and sometimes purposefully at odds with discourses of Indian nationalism; the dance is used instead to integrate into national cultures of the U.S. and the U.K. through the occupation of public spaces and associations with non-Indian dancers and techniques. Through the examples of Akādemi in London and the Leela Institute in Los Angeles, I have presented the integrative model as a strategy focused on inclusion within American and British national cultures, not necessarily a strategy focused on the dismantling of these hegemonic frameworks. Thus, while an integrative-model practice of Kathak can offer diasporic Indian subjects a wide variety of entry points into a shared national culture that is built on establishing sameness rather than difference, it also runs the risk of pandering to Western techniques, aesthetics, and structures of knowledge in a way that flattens the practice of Kathak dance in the name of universality.

I have outlined these two complex and seemingly contradictory approaches to diasporic Kathak practice in separate chapters to more clearly delineate their motivations and mechanisms. However, I also demonstrated how diasporic Kathak dancers and dance institutions readily engage with strategies from both heritage model and integrative models of Kathak as part of their ongoing negotiations of identity and belonging. The strategies and values that define these two

models are not exclusive of each other—rather, diasporic dancers are always moving between different approaches and evaluations of Kathak, highlighting again the processual nature of identity formation.

While I have shown how diasporic Kathak dance continually moves across a spectrum of fixity and flexibility, I must note that this dissertation does not attempt to account for the full breadth of diasporic Kathak practice. My theorizations of Kathak in this study offer a few entry points into the question of diasporic identity and dance practice in London and Los Angeles, but I am not claiming to represent the huge variety of lived experiences and individual expressions that make up the rich practice of Kathak in these two cities or in the larger Indian diaspora. I have grounded this dissertation in interviews and reflections from many diasporic Kathak dancers, and I have engaged with specificity where relevant to my argument. Still, the purpose of this project at its core has been to underline the flexible, emergent, and broad nature of identity through an exploration of the particular motivations and techniques that attempt to fix identity. Flexibility and fixity are co-dependent, ever-changing, and engaged in a circular tension. Diasporic subjects trace this circle through their dance.

Appendix A:
Popular *Taals* (Rhythmic Cycles) in the Practice of Kathak Dance

The *taals* or rhythmic cycles listed here are common to Kathak practice, though there are many other taals Kathak dancers can engage with. The taals listed here have been notated in the Bhatkhande style, developed by musicologist Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande, and transliterated into English letters. While the division of the *bols* (syllables) is standard, there may be slight variances in the bols themselves between different regional practices of Kathak. The bols included here reflect the taals as I have learned them under the tutelage of Guru Rachana Upadhyay in Los Angeles, and as described by Kathak scholar Puru Dhadeech (2016).

Teen Taal: 16-beat time cycle

1	2	3	4		5	6	7	8	
Dha	Dhin	Dhin	Dha	|	Dha	Dhin	Dhin	Dha	|
×					2				
9	10	11	12		13	14	15	16	
Dha	Tin	Tin	Ta	|	Ta	Dhin	Dhin	Dha	|
○					3				

Kheherva: 8-beat time cycle

1	2	3	4		5	6	7	8	
Dha	Ge	Na	Ti	|	Na	Ka	Dhi	Na	|
×					○				

Dadra: 6-beat time cycle

1	2	3		4	5	6	
Dha	Dhi	Na	|	Dha	Tu	Na	|
×				○			

Jhaptaal: 10-beat time cycle

1	2		3	4	5	
Dhi	Na	|	Dhi	Dhi	Na	|
×			2			
6	7		8	9	10	
Ti	Na	|	Dhi	Dhi	Na	|
○			3			

Ektaal: 12-beat time cycle

1	2		3	4	
Dhin	Dhin	|	Dhage	Tirakita	|
×			○		
5	6		7	8	
Tu	Na	|	Kat	Ta	|
2			○		
9	10		11	12	
Dhage	Tirakita	|	Dhi	Na	|
3			4		

Roopak: 7-beat time cycle

1	2	3		4	5		6	7	
Tin	Tin	Na	|	Dhi	Na	|	Dhi	Na	|
○				1			2		

Sooltaal: 10-beat time cycle

1	2		3	4	
Dha	Dha	|	Dhin	Ta	|
×			○		
5	6		7	8	
Kita	Dha	|	Tita	Kata	|
2			3		
9	10				
Gadi	Gana	|			
○					

Dhamaar: 14-beat time cycle

1	2	3	4	5		6	7	
Ka	Dhi	Ta	Dhi	Ta	|	Dha	—	|
×						2		
8	9	10				11	12	13	14	
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Ga	Ti	Ta			|	Ti	Ta	Ta	—	|
○						3				

Ada Chautaal: 14-beat time cycle

1	2		3	4	
Dhin	Trak	|	Dhi	Na	|
×			○		
5	6		7	8	
Tu	Na	|	Kata	Ta	|
2			○		
9	10		11	12	
Trak	Dhi	|	Na	Dhi	|
3			4		
13	14				
Dhi	Na	|			
○					

Teevra: 7-beat time cycle

1	2	3		4	5		6	7	
Dha	Din	Ta	|	Tita	Kata	|	Gadi	Gana	|
×				2			3		

Chautaal: 12-beat time cycle

1	2		3	4	
Dha	Dha	|	Dhin	Ta	|
×			○		
5	6		7	8	
Kita	Dha	|	Dhin	Ta	|
2			○		
9	10		11	12	
Tita	Kata	|	Gadi	Gana	|
3			4		

Deepachandi: 14-beat time cycle

1	2	3		4	5	6	7	
Dha	Dhin	—	|	Dha	Dha	Dhin	—	|
×				2				
8	9	10		11	12	13	14	
Dha	Tin	—	|	Ta	Ta	Dhin	—	|
○				3				

Dhumali: 8-beat time cycle

1	2		3	4	
Dha	Dhin	|	Dha	Tin	|
×			2		
5	6		7	8	
Taka	Dhin	|	Dhage	Tirkit	|
○			3		

Pancham Sawaari: 15-beat time cycle

1	2	3		4	5	6	7	
Dhi	Na	DhiDhi	|	Kat	DhiDhi	NaDhi	DhiNa	|
×				2				
8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
Tikda	Tuna	Tirakita	Tuna |	Katta	DhiDhi	NaDhi	DhiNa	|
○				4				

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