

Mahari Out: Deconstructing Odissi

Dissertation

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Abstract

I surface the artistic lineage of the *Maharis* or temple dancers marginalized in the history of the eastern Indian classical dance style called *Odissi* by focusing on the mediation of *Mahari* ritual performance within the embodied knowledge of contemporary *Odissi* practice. I position my investigation in the field of Practice-as-Research evidencing my research inquiry through praxis—theory imbricated in practice as defined by Practice-as-Research scholar Robin Nelson. Imbricating critical cultural theory and movement practice, I examine *Mahari* praxis within an interdisciplinary investigation combining religious studies, sexuality studies, technology studies, dance studies, and South Asian studies. The *Mahari* danced in the Hindu temples of Odisha, the state from which *Odissi* originates, from the twelfth to early twentieth century. Mythically, she descends from the *Alasa-Kanya*, female sculptural figure adorning the temple-walls of Odisha. Being ritually married to *Jagannath*, the Hindu male deity presiding over *Odissi* dance, she had a sexual life outside of social marriage within circles of the indigenous elites. Although, *Odissi* is premised on *Mahari* ritual performativity in front of *Jagannath* to establish historical continuity, it does not acknowledge her creative practice for her alleged links to prostitution. I redress the appropriation of the *Mahari* in *Odissi* technique, by reimagining her in my choreographed *Odissi* movement and in its subsequent digital mediation as 3D

data using motion capture technology. In solo and group choreographic works and their virtual adaptations, I explore the *Mahari*'s ritual performance in the temple alongside examining her mythical associations in ancient and medieval temple-sculpture. In an intermodal inquiry spanning live dancing, digital visualization of live movement, and stone sculpture, I highlight the unacknowledged aesthetics of the *Mahari* tradition within the *Odissi* body by discovering the twisting movements of the *Mahari* in my practice. Bringing poststructuralist theories of deconstruction together with technological and improvisatory measures of deconstructing my embodied practice, I argue that the *Mahari* performativity creates a potential to subvert the conservative horizon of *Odissi*. In my innovative methodological maneuver, multiple registers of mediation—historical and technological—co-construct *Mahari* embodiment across stone sculpture, 3D data, and the live dancing body enlivening the ever-elusive *Mahari* in her aesthetic, social, sexual, and historical complexity, and reorienting *Odissi*'s patriarchal center occupied by *Jagannath*.

Dedication

Dedicated to Ma, Baba, Vineet, and Bordidi

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I offer this writing to my Ma and Baba for always allowing me to pursue my desire.

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Fields of Study

Major Field: Dance Studies

Additional Fields of Study: Digital Humanities, Religious Studies, Performance Studies, Gender Studies, Sexuality Studies

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Spellings for Indian-language Terminology

I use conventional phonetic spellings of Sanskrit (ancient Indian language) and Oriya (regional language of Odisha) terms. Since I do not have the expertise of specialized knowledge in either *Sanskrit* or *Oriya*, I do not use diacritical marks that assist the pronunciation in the original language. For example, I use *Jagannath* instead of *Jagannatha*, *Krishna* instead of *Krsna*, etc. Different scholars have chosen to use different spellings for the same name, idea, or terminology, such as *Gita Govinda*, *Gitagovinda*, *Geeta Govinda*, *Geetagovindam* for Jayadeva's twelfth century text. While quoting them, I use their spellings but otherwise, I use the standard phonetic spelling. Finally, following the MLA style guide, I use Italics for all non-English words including common names. For example, I use italics to describe the institution of the temple-dancers—*Mahari*. While referring to a particular individual belonging to the *Mahari* tradition—Ratna Prabha, Sashimoni, Kokila—I do not use italics.

Glossary

Abarta Puspita: The cycle of a flower as a bud to full blossom through its interaction with the sun

Abhinaya: Expressional Movement

Alasa-Kanya: Indolent female entities adorning the walls of Odishan temples also known as the progenitors of the *Mahari*

Bansi Mudra: Hand gesture showing *Krishna*'s flute

Batu: Pure dance segment in *Odissi* demonstrating the foundational elements of

Bhakti: Devotion or a seventh century devotional paradigm forging personal relationship with *Krishna*

Bhanga: Posture in *Odissi*

Bhitara Gauni: The *Mahari* who sings in the inner sanctum

Brahmaris: Spins

Chakra: Disc of *Krishna* to decapitate evil doers

Chauka: A square body posture emulating *Jagannath*

Chhapaka: The slingshot step common to both *Mahari* and *Odissi* vocabulary

Deis: Dancers in the royal court

Devadasi: Temple-dancer

Garba-Griha: Indigenous term for the inner sanctum

Gaudiya Vaishnavism: A *Vaishnava* religious movement founded by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1534) in Bengal

Gitagovinda: A twelfth century text by Jayadeva describing the amorous passions of Hindu celestial deities, *Radha* and *Krishna*

Gopibhava: Self-surrender to the divine in love

Gopis: Cow-herdresses of *Vrindavana*

Gotipua: Boy dressed as a dancer

Hamsadhwani: An Indian melodic mode that Kelucharan Mohapatra used to choreograph his signature piece called *Hamsadhwani Pallavi* exploring the melodic cycles of the music in movement

Jagannath: Presiding deity of *Odissi* dance and the male Hindu divine consort of the *Mahari*

Kala: Art

Kali: A ferocious goddess and another representation of *Sakti*

Kapalikas: Skull-bearers

Kama: Hindu god of love

Kula ritual: *Tantric* sexual intercourse

Krishna: Male Hindu god, same avatars as of *Jagannath* and *Visnu*

Lakshmi: Hindu goddess of wealth
Madhu: Honey
Mahari: Temple-dancer
Maithuna: Sexual intercourse
Mardala: The sixteenth *Alasa-Kanya* as well as the percussive hand drum used in *Odissi* as well as accompanying *Mahari* performance
Maya: Illusion
Meena-Danda: *Mahari*'s quintessential signature move that she used for her entry-sequences
Mudra: Hand gesture
Odissi: The Indian classical dance form of Odisha
Odramagadhi: The name used for *Odissi* in the *Natyasastra*
Pallavi: Pure dance segment in *Odissi* creating a beautiful tapestry of rhythm, movement, and music
Pahuda Alati: Bedtime rituals for *Jagannath*
Parakiyai: Love for another's lover
Patuara: Procession
RathaYatra: Chariot ceremony
Rajguru: Head-priest
Rasa: Flavor
Sahrdaya: A viewer of aesthetic performance who is knowledgeable of the strictures of *Rasa* and experiences *Rasa* as well
Saivite: Worshipers of *Siva*
Sakhala Dhupa: Morning Ritual of the *Mahari* in the *Jagannath* temple
Saktas: Goddess worshippers
Sakti: The eternal feminine principle of power pervading throughout the cosmos and in all living beings
Sakta Tantrism: Goddess worship
Samyoga: Sexual union
Saris: A long piece of fabric wrapped around the body as a traditional South Asian female attire
Shringara Rasa: Erotic Desire
Siva: A Hindu male deity who is the male partner of *Sakti*
Sukasarika: The thirteenth *Alasa-Kanya* who is talking to a parrot who is her friend
Tantra: Esoteric religious practice in Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism often involving ritual sexual union with a religious consort for attaining liberation
Tri Bhanga: A tri-bended posture with three bends at the knees, hips, and neck

Ucchista (*Kali Ucchista* or *Sakti Ucchista*): Left-overs by the goddess
Utplabanas: Leaps
Vaisnava Sahajiya: A form of *Tantric Vaisnavism* centered in Bengal and considered a left-hand path
Vaisnavism: Worshipping Hindu male deity *Vishnu*
Viparita: Opposite
Viparita Bhanga: Opposite of *Tri Bhanga*
Vishnu: Male Hindu deity; same as *Krishna* and *Jagannath*
Vrindavana: The place where *Krishna* spent his childhood and adolescence

Chapter 1: Introduction

In this dissertation, I investigate, surface, and theorize the role of the *Mahari*, the historical temple-dancer through movement that I inherit implicitly in my training in *Odissi*.¹ Over time, *Odissi* dance has appropriated *Mahari* dancing, obscuring the artistic traces of the temple-dancing tradition. This is premised on an ahistorical understanding of *Mahari* ritual as the actual *Maharis* were marginalized during the initial development of *Odissi*, in the middle of the twentieth century. *Odissi* is an eastern Indian classical dance form originating from the state of Odisha that was first mentioned as *Odramagadhi* in the Indian performing arts treatise called *Natyasastra* written in 200 B.C. The *Mahari* performed in the Hindu temples of Odisha from the twelfth to the twentieth century and the institution ended with the death of Sashimani Devi, the last surviving *Mahari* (Barry). In this project, I reconstruct the *Mahari* legacy as I recover fragmentary traces of *Mahari* movement in my textually overdetermined *Odissi* technique. I recreate her in existing *Odissi* repertoire as well as in my creative research in choreography and digital mediation. I contest *Odissi*'s embedded hierarchies in which the male Hindu god, *Jagannath* occupies the center while his mortal consort, the *Mahari* supplicates to him. I do so by

¹ *Odissi* is historically influenced by the *Mahari*, temple-dancer and the *Gotipua*, boy dancing as a girl. Here, I do not engage with the *Gotipua* tradition as I focus on deconstructing my *Odissi* body to reconstruct the *Mahari*.

imbricating poststructuralist theories of deconstruction within my studio practice to deconstruct my training. Researching the kinesthetic artistic contributions of the historical *Mahari*, I follow established protocols in Practice as Research (PaR) that centralize the unique physicality of dance practice.² I establish the practicing body at the center by providing documentations of it in my inter-modal PaR outcomes that take the form of a written thesis, an online compendium documenting my practice via pictures, videos, sketches, graphs, and journal entries, and the digital files of my PaR artistic products in performance, choreography, and 3D animation. In all these modalities, I seek out the living, breathing, and sensing *Mahari* body as mediated in my *Odissi* movement to contest her marginalization in the dominant historiography.³

The historical formulation of *Odissi* dance as a two-thousand-year-old movement tradition instrumentally deploys the *Mahari* in order to establish cultural continuity while simultaneously constructing her as a timeless, mythical, and mute consort of *Jagannath*, the Hindu male deity presiding over *Odissi*. The *Mahari* performed in the *Jagannath* temple from the twelfth to the twentieth century, although the institution of appointing *Maharis* suffered major resistance

² Widely established in the academic environment of arts research in the UK, Practice as Research is a mode of research inquiry in which practice is a key method of inquiry and generally, a practice element is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry (Fuschini; Kershaw; Nelson; Smith; Dean;).

³ Later, in this chapter, I articulate the three historical periods in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial India during which the *Mahari* body was increasingly sidelined in the popular imaginary.

during the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods. By the 1930s, *Odissi* dance became part of the Indian nationalist project of reconstructing the ancient Indian heritage. The cultural revivalists branded *Odissi* as a classical dance form formulated on the template defined by prominent dance-scholar Rukmini Devi Arundale, known for the resurrection of the first instituted Indian classical dance form called *Bharatnatyam* (Coorlawala, “Sanskritized Body” 51). The postcolonial reconstruction of *Odissi* in the 1950s as a nationally recognized Indian classical dance form, prioritized textual linkages to the ancient and medieval Hindu religious manuscripts (*Natyasastra*, *Abhinaya Darpana*, and *Abhinaya Chandrika*) while disregarding the embodied contributions of the *Maharis* as historical practitioners of *Odissi*. In addition, *Odissi* downplayed its association with the temple-dancers, given their sexually active status outside of social marriage and their alleged ties to prostitution. *Mahari* ritual specialists were stigmatized by both indigenous elites and British colonizers for their undomesticated sexuality outside of monogamous conjugality. In 2015, the institution officially ended with the death of Sashimani Devi. Yet, the *Mahari* tradition holds a complex role in *Odissi* history since the abstract representation of *Mahari* ritual performance as the epitome of devotion to *Jagannath* continues to shape the foundational basis of *Odissi* although *Odissi* advances the devotional

realm of the *Mahari* to the artistic through its textual paradigm based on ancient Hindu scriptures.⁴

I surface the *Mahari* tradition for its possible subversive influence to contest, complicate, and disrupt the conservative construction of the contemporary *Odissi* dancing body. Through this project, I contest *Odissi*'s orthodox values via surfacing the transgressive dimensions of sexuality characteristic of the historical *Mahari*.⁵ The *Mahari* dancers performed during temple-rituals and were married to the male Hindu deity *Jagannath*, who is also the devoted deity of contemporary *Odissi* artists.⁶ *Mahari* ritual performance had sexual implications that ensured their fertility in the Hindu kingdom where she also had sexual relationships with the elite Hindus. Anthropologist and *Odissi* dancer, Frederique Apffel-Marglin argues that *Mahari* sexuality was tied to her ritual auspiciousness required for the fertility of the Hindu life-world. The author delineates that the history of *Mahari* devotional dancing shows that her sexuality

⁴ *Odissi* is an internationally popular dance form travelling globally through high art concert venues and diasporic cultural festivals, and is also shared through *YouTube* videos and animation film festivals (Kannapurakkaran).

⁵ S. Anandhi problematizes the romanticized sexual potential of the temple-dancer. She alleges that upper-caste men sexually violated these women and the system was intrinsically exploitative needing reform. While I do not deny the element of sexual exploitation in the *Mahari* tradition, I am interested to explore the potential of her sexually transgressive religious and social practices in reorienting my sexually conservative movement practice. Also, I am unable to engage with the hierarchical system of caste practiced in South Asia as an axis of difference. I address this while showing the future scope of this work in my "Conclusion."

⁶ Similarly, the *Odissi* dancer, irrespective of male or female, poses as *Jagannath*'s bride, wearing the ornaments that the *Mahari* temple-dancers wore during her ritual performance.

was the principal component of her spiritual practice. But as time and values changed, her sexuality outside of marriage concerned various groups at various points in history. While *Mahari* dancing had a covert component of life-affirming explicit sexuality, the contemporary *Odissi* body is founded upon a sexually conservative understanding of the *Mahari* whose physical and spiritual proximity to the *Jagannath* temple and the *Jagannath* deity makes her the embodiment of divinity. At the same time that it appropriates the *Mahari* ritual aura, *Odissi* distances itself from the *Mahari* by grounding its history in the ancient textual treatises. The dance instrumentalizes the *Mahari* to establish its historical continuity within the ancient Hindu tradition. Thus, invoking the sexually complicated *Mahari* within the sexually conservative *Odissi* serves as a subversive potential to reorient the orthodox notions of female sexuality revolving around the male-center while correcting a historical marginalization in the Indian performing arts context.

It is pertinent to note that the sexuality of the *Mahari* is completely obscured in the contemporary *Odissi* body, especially in my training in Kelucharan Mohapatra style of *Odissi*. In general, *Odissi* celebrates the historical *Mahari* as an epitome of divine celibacy. It obscures the ritually-affirming and undomesticated sexuality of the *Mahari* by neutering her as the celibate wife of *Jagannath*. *Odissi* dancers reimagine the *Mahari* body in supplication to the male

Jagannath in life-long devotion vowed to chastity. They do not engage with the complex history of *Odissi* that homogenizes heterogeneous movement traditions of the sexually active temple-dancer, the *Mahari* and the *Gotipua* who were young boys dressed as girls performing outside the temples.⁷ *Odissi* scholar Anurima Banerji recognizes the coexistence of alternate sexualities of the *Maharis* and the *Gotipuas* within the historical construction of *Odissi*. She theorizes *Odissi* as a state of paratopia, which she defines as a space of alterity that reimagines orthodoxies of gender and sexuality against the mandates of the state and what is scripted in social law. Escaping colonial scrutiny for their prepubertal status, *Gotipuas* continue to thrive in their originary rural context as well as in urban areas alongside *Odissi* dancing, while the *Mahari* institution has been completely appropriated by *Odissi* dancers. Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra was a *Gotipua* dancer in his childhood and his style is biased towards the *Gotipua* tradition. As an exponent of his style, I am aware of his historical marginalization of the *Mahari* in the technical dictates of *Odissi*, giving it a conservative tenor. In practice and theory, I seek to surface *Mahari* sexual potential to contest, complicate, question, and foreground the sexuality embedded in contemporary *Odissi*.⁸

⁷ *Mahari* dancing was introduced in the Odishan temples in the twelfth century while *Gotipua* started during the sixteenth century.

⁸ Although outside the scope of my dissertation, a detailed ethnographic, historical, and theoretical investigation of *Gotipua* movement, aesthetics, and performativity is long due in the scholarly

Odissi dance-scholars, Ananya Chatterjea, Anurima Banerji, Rohini Dandavate, and Shreelina Ghosh who have delineated different aspects of *Odissi* history, performativity, pedagogy, and transnational dissemination have critiqued the marginalization of the *Mahari* practice in the construction of modern-day *Odissi*. These scholars lay important groundwork and, while they have brilliantly articulated the cultural, historical, and theoretical concerns regarding *Odissi*'s indifference to the *Mahari* tradition, they do not engage with her movement practice. In this way, they continue to disrobe the *Mahari* of artistic agency.

Building upon these scholars, I focus on acknowledging the *Mahari* as a dancer as I repurpose her ritual performance to concert dancing. The voice of the sentient, moving, feeling, and practicing *Odissi* body, engaged in its canonical repertoire⁹ is missing in South Asian Dance Studies scholarship. In this reconstruction exercise, I find it pertinent to center my movement as a principal mode of research. The *Mahari* moved to the percussive dictates of the drums or to her own singing of the *Gitagovinda*, a twelfth century lyrical ballad written by Jayadeva, during the worshipping rituals in the *Jagannath* temple. Her ritual dancing was integral to the successful execution of the overall ritual program in

investigations of *Odissi*. Banerji presents a historical overview on the *Gotipuas* in a chapter-length inquiry, "Ecstasy and Madness: Gotipuas, Gender Performance, and the Body in Bhakti."

⁹ The traditional *Odissi* repertory consists of *Mangalacharan* (Invocation), *Batu* (Fundamentals), *Pallavi* (Ornamentations), *Abhinaya* (Expressions), and *Moksha* (Salvation) (Srjan).

the *Jagannath* temple. I reimagine the *Mahari* performance in the Odishan temple through a creative reenactment of her historical ritual performance. As an *Odissi* practitioner trained in Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra style of *Odissi*, I question the unacknowledged status of the *Mahari* as a dancer by establishing embodied linkages between my practice and that of my ancestral practitioners. To do that, I explore the mythical and ritual links between *Mahari* practice and the Hindu temples of Odisha. According to Sashimani Devi, the *Mahari* mythically descends from the lineage of heavenly nymphs and celestial dancers who are also represented by the sculptural *Alasa-Kanyas* (*Given to Dance*). I consider her religious ritual observances in the Hindu temples alongside her mythical affiliations to temple sculpture. I invoke ritual, sculptural, and embodied traces of the *Mahari* in existing *Odissi* repertory as well as in creative reenactments in stage choreography and concert visualization.

In my creative reenactments, I locate the body within the textually overdetermined codified *Odissi* repertoire by actively invoking the ritual performative elements of the *Mahari*. South Asian Dance studies scholar, Avanthi Meduri precludes such a possibility of a history-from-below project in the field of Indian classical dance as she believes that the movement does not stand outside verbal representations, given its structure within textual treatises. She argues that the dance is textually overdetermined, and the body can be read only as a

linguistic text with its hyper-codified gesticulation where each gesture corresponds to an array of textual interpretations. I resist Meduri's prohibition by treating my embodied movement on a historical continuum across *Mahari* ritual performances and my *Odissi* concert practice. Given the sensate nature of *Mahari* performance that I notice in Sashimoni Devi's dancing, I find the fragmentary traces of the *Mahari* repertory within the sensations of my *Odissi* movement. I suggest that the *Mahari* persists from within *Odissi* even though the popular history of *Odissi* dance draws from the ancient written treatises. This procedure considers the artistic legacy of the *Mahari* without simplistically reifying her as the mute celibate virgin wife of *Jagannath* without any creative agency. Finding traces of her embodied movement within my sentient movement practice works as a strategy to locate the embodiment not only of the historical practitioners but also in my personal practice. *Odissi* technique is filled with textual injunctions and verbal codifications. Finding my sentient body via a deconstruction of my codified practice, in turn, embodies performativity in *Odissi* given that it is otherwise hypercodified via a textual canon.

The strategy of locating the temple-dancer in contemporary concert space has been theoretically employed by other South Asian scholars prior to my work. Meduri argues for the haunting presence of the temple-dancer in the southern Indian classical dance style called *Bharatnatyam* through its association with

Sadir, the dance performed by the temple-dancers. Meduri finds vestiges of *Sadir* in the vanity-mirror, ankle-bells, nose-rings, and floral hair décor of the *Bharatnatyam* artist. Another *Bharatnatyam* artist-scholar, Priya Srinivasan recognizes the labor by the temple-dancer in her haunted presence within the *Bharatnatyam* dancing body. Srinivasan critiques the simplistic reading of the “sari, jewelry, make-up, hair ornamentation, or bells” that connects to the ritual aura of the temple-dancers and argues for the traces of the fleshly and laboring body of the temple-dancer (53).

I too wear jewelry, ankle-bells, costumes, and floral head décor as worn by the *Mahari*, while I also repeat some of her movements in my dance practice. Instead of focusing on my ornamental associations with the *Mahari*, I find the performative connections between us through her movements including the *Meena-Danda*, or the fish-walk gait in which I twist my torso, hips, heels, and ankles. The *Mahari* used the *Meena-Danda* to enter the dancing-hall or the *Natamandira*, whereas I use it to enter the proscenium theater during my concert performances. While Srinivasan locates the labor of the historical practitioners in the sweating saris of the contemporary concert performers, I focus on the twisting moves of the *Meena-Danda* as permeating the entirety of *Odissi*. I attribute the twisting movements of *Odissi* dance to the *Mahari* as opposed to the choreographic genius of *Odissi* choreographers in order to acknowledge the lost

embodied lineage of the temple-dancer. Twists in *Odissi* do not have an indigenous name in the classical canon and are often communicated to the students through strategies of imitation. In these quintessential twists that *Odissi* dance is often characterized with and known for, I locate embodiment through the lineage of the historical *Mahari*. *Odissi* technique refers to the codified textual injunctions laid down in *Sanskrit* texts as a measure for clarity in technique at the cost of marginalizing the contributions from the *Mahari* tradition by not explicitly acknowledging her movement influences in contemporary *Odissi*. Following Meduri and Srinivasan, I explore experiential encounters between *Odissi* and *Mahari* movement traditions, locating the agency of the *Mahari* within the embodiment of my *Odissi* body punctuating the textualized *Sanskritized* aesthetics.

I use my contemporary practice to comment upon and recreate historical practice through performative and technological means inspired by similar work in the field of critical dance studies. In *Traces of Light: Absence and Presence in the Work of Loïe Fuller*, eminent dance-scholar Ann Cooper Albright uses an embodied approach to investigate the performative practices of her historical subject, the American dancer, performer, and choreographer, Loïe Fuller (1862-1928), who has been marginalized in dance history while being elevated for her innovative experimentations with lighting technology. Albright's active

methodology of ‘doing history’ by confronting her historical subject with her own persona, and recreating Fuller’s performance strategies using available lighting and costuming technologies, blurs distinctions across time and space in what the writer claims is a contact duet. Through her contemporary practice, Albright comments on Fuller’s historical practice and contests the popular assumptions of Fuller as a dancer. In a similar maneuver, I enliven the *Mahari* by reconstructing her movement using performance, choreography, and 3D animation. I present a performative description of *Mahari* ritual. I delineate my choreographic process and outcome of emanating the *Mahari* in live performance. Finally, I collaboratively recreate the *Mahari* motility alongside her ritual aura in 3D digital animation. I politically align my multi-modal reconstruction of a historical subject with Albright’s approach to Fuller.

I engage with critical cultural theory to complement my practical investigation of the *Mahari* within *Odissi* in order to liberate her as a destabilizing impulse. Her practice has the potential to reorient meaning-making in *Odissi* nudging *Odissi*’s center away from the male Hindu deity of *Jagannath*. According to philosopher Jacques Derrida, deconstruction is a theoretical maneuver that destabilizes the hierarchy between the centers and margins of a given area of knowledge. The unopposed center in *Odissi* is occupied by the male Hindu deity *Jagannath* whereas the *Mahari* is technically *Jagannath*’s wife whose ritual

dancing is the means of performative sexual pacification of *Jagannath*. The sexual pacification of *Jagannath* through *Mahari* ritual dance is considered instrumental to ensure the smooth life-cycle in the Odishan Hindu kingdom. I question this assumed hierarchy between the *Mahari* and her divine husband by showing how her movement renegotiates the spiritual locus in *Odissi*. I suggest the *Mahari*, in her movement, questions the authority vested in *Jagannath* by reorienting the spiritual foci to her ritual dancing. The *Mahari* becomes the deconstructive in *Odissi*. She is the unstable foundation of *Odissi* that has the potential of shaking its foundational beliefs and characteristics.

The sexually potent *Mahari* reorients the conservative heteronormative construction of sexuality in the *Odissi* dancing body. At the center of this investigation, lies the twisting *Meena-Danda* of the *Mahari* that is a twisting fish-walk gait requiring the torso and the hips to move in opposition to one another in twisted configurations. It inspires a queer reading of *Odissi* as I etymologically connect the twist to queer in Latin *torquere* meaning twist. This embodied use of queer as a transitive verb resists normativity in the *Odissi* since it allows the non-normative practices of the *Mahari* to override the puritanical construction of sexuality in *Odissi*. I want to preface my queering of *Odissi* by Banerji's cautionary note. She critiques the use of 'queer' in the characterization of the *Maharis* and the *Gotipuas* because they do characterize deviant sexualities, given

their once elevated status in their regional existence. Instead, their extraordinary genders inspire Banerji to create a regional epistemology, coining her original concept of *paratopia* or the space of alterity via extraordinary genders within an existing historical situation. However, I suggest that Banerji does not consider the embodied performativity of the yet unnamed *Mahari* twist. The twist I encounter in my studio experiments leads me to the undomesticated, non-conjugal, and unconventional sexualities of the *Mahari*, opening queer possibilities within *Odissi*. The *Mahari*'s non-normative socio-sexual status creates parallels between her praxis and queer theoretical techniques. Instead of *Odissi*'s sole focus on the normative monogamous sexual supplication of *Jagannath*, surfacing the *Mahari* using the queer lens unearths the sexual freedom enjoyed by her outside of monogamous conjugality. She embodied the unconventional sexuality in performances, ritual purposes, and in her social life. One can decipher from the name of my dissertation, *Mahari Out: Deconstructing Odissi* that theories of deconstruction and queer sexuality form an important foundation of my praxis. I use the term *out* as a strategic maneuver to align with queer studies while claiming allegiance to poststructuralist theories of deconstruction.

I devise an intermodal methodology across the live dancing body, stone sculpture, and digital mediation while imbricating poststructuralist theories of deconstruction in my movement practice. First, I invoke the *Mahari* in traditional

Odissi repertory. Then, I surface the *Mahari* explicitly in creative explorations within choreography and 3D animation. Theory imbricates my practice as I realign my relationship to my movement practice through dance improvisation and technological modes of deconstruction (converting my movement into 3D data using motion capture technology). In these creative deconstructions of the *Mahari*, she presents an opportunity from within the *Odissi* body to deconstruct its hierarchies via a marginal yet potent positionality. This reorientation, I suggest, (corpo)-realizes the textually overdetermined and disembodied Indian classical dancing body and braids dance studies, religious studies, digital humanities, and sexuality studies together, gently nudging the centers and margins of each strand. I find existing, and create new, traces of the historical *Mahari* ritual and the mythical *Alasa-Kanya* sculpture. I improvise on *Odissi* technique as well as explore creative manifestations of the *Mahari* in my art practice. My choreography for concert performance exaggerates the serpentine twists of the *Mahari Meena-Danda*. I use choreographic scores generated in my studio praxis by improvising on the sixteen *Alasa-Kanyas* as listed in the *Silpa Prakasa*, the architectural and sculptural manual of temple construction in Odisha by Kaulacara Ramachandra. Using these prompts for generating movement material, I choreograph a piece called *Alasa-Kanya: Sculpture in Odissi* for the students of Kenyon College to explore the ritual, mythical, and sculptural connections of the

Mahari in *Odissi* dance. Further, I use digital mediation to create digital incarnations of my movement by capturing it using motion capture technology. I make this conversion to 3D data in order to analyze as well as visualize my movement at a distance from my moving body. The technological domain makes a decisive break from the linguistic connection of the codified *Odissi* body. Digital mediation introduces the possibilities of using the technological domain to resignify *Odissi* movement away from the textual treatises to that of the historical *Mahari*. I collaborate with digital artist Steve Conroy to create a 3D animation sequence *Out-ing Mahari: Sculptural Fragments* where my embodied *Odissi* choreography moves 3D computer generated models demonstrating the performative characteristics of the *Mahari*, both in actual movement as well as in their performative readaptations.

Below, I present a historical overview exploring the processes of disenfranchisement of the *Mahari* dancing body by the precolonial Bhakti movement, the colonial movement, and the nationalist construction of *Odissi* dance in a brief chronological evolution. Then, I give a brief account of my PaR methodology, describing my hybrid methods of imbricating poststructuralist theories of deconstruction in my practical investigations in performance, choreography, improvisation, and 3D *animation*. At the end, I introduce the chapter summaries for the remaining chapters of my dissertation.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Here, I present a brief historical overview of *Odissi* and discuss the gradual disenfranchisement of the temple-dancing tradition over a period of four hundred years from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. Dance historians have successfully traced the lineage of present-day *Odissi* to archaeological, sculptural, architectural, textual, and embodied traces for the past two millennia. In this discussion, I draw heavily from arguments made by Anurima Banerji in her dissertation *Odissi Dance*, which is by far the most comprehensive account of *Odissi* history across the ancient, medieval, colonial, and postcolonial periods. By showing the rule of various kingdoms and dynasties with multiple religious affiliations, in Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, I show how the *Mahari* dancers were categorically robbed of ritual, sexual, artistic, and social agency. The *Mahari* tradition was particularly targeted by the *Bhakti* movement of the sixteenth century, the British colonial encounter in the nineteenth century, and the social reform movement flowing into the Indian nationalist prerogative of instituting classical dances at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Dance in Odisha has had a flourishing existence since second century B.C. due to the political and artistic patronage by several kings belonging to multiple dynasties and multiple religious affiliations (Maitra 165). It has been influenced by *Shakta Tantrism* (worshipping goddess *Sakti*), *Vaishnavism* (worshipping male

deity *Visnu*), and *Saivism* (worshipping *Siva*) within Hinduism¹⁰ as well as other religions, namely, Buddhism, Islam, and Jainism. Several important dynasties, the *Chedi*, the *Bhauma-Kara*, the *Somavamsi-Kesari*, the *Ganga*, the *Surya*, and the *Mughals* ruled India from the pre-Christian era until the nineteenth century C.E. The temples in Odisha evidence the widespread popularity of dance over the centuries.¹¹ Archaeological evidence from the rock-cut cave temples of *Khandagiri* and *Udaygiri*, built in the second century B.C. by of Jain king Kharavela belonging to the Chedi dynasty, are cited as evidence that *Odissi* is the oldest Indian classical dance form. The inscriptional evidence in the Hati Gumpah caves of the Udaygiri temple denotes that king Kharavela was himself a *Gandharva-veda-budha*, meaning an expert in music, dance, and drama (Banerji and Jayaswal, 79). In the post-Kharavela period, the *Bhauma-Karas* ruled over Odisha until the eighth century C.E. during which Buddhism and *Tantrism* were influential and received royal patronage. Buddhist goddesses such as *Heruka*, *Marichi*, *Vajravarahi*, *Achala*, and *Aparajita*, feature in the dance sculptures of Udaygiri, Lalitgiri, Ratnagiri, and Altagiri. Charles Louis Fabri, a Hungarian Indologist and art critic, mentions the dancing image in the monastery of

¹⁰ Hinduism is a heterogeneous amalgamation of multiple religious and sectarian affiliations including *Saivism* (worshipping male deity *Siva*), *Vaishnavism* (worshipping male deity *Visnu*), and *Saktism* (worshipping female deity *Sakti*). Here, I use Hindu as a conglomerate term as well as to denote each of its historical strands.

¹¹ Donaldson in this treatise *Hindu Temple Art of Odisha* speculates about the prevalence of dancing given the numerous dancing bodies among the temple-sculptures.

Ratnagiri dates 850 C.E. The *Chausathi Jogini Temple*, a *Tantric* temple constructed in the ninth century C.E. by queen Hiradevi of the *Bramha* dynasty, has numerous dancing postures of *Bhairav*, *Tantric* god and *Yogini*, *Tantric* goddess.¹²

With the receding of Jainism and Buddhism, *Saivite* (worshipping Hindu male god *Siva*) and *Shakta* (worshipping Hindu female goddess *Sakti*) cults started emerging with the successive occupation of parts of Odisha by the *Somavamsi-Kesaris*. Earlier, *Bhauma-Karas* had merged indigenous forms of worship with *Shakti* doctrine celebrating the goddess in her grotesque beauty. The *Somavamsi-Kesaris* embraced *Shaivism*, worshipping of *Siva*, while integrating Buddhist and Jain influences in their rituals. They replaced the frightful images with benign and softened depictions of the goddess, in what dance-scholar Banerji sums up “as an abrupt movement from *bhayanak* and *bibhatsa* to *shringar* and *shanti*” (*Odissi Dance* 164).¹³ Donaldson notes that sculptural figures of the

¹² Alessandra Lopez Royo in her film *Performing Konarak, Performing Hirapur: Documenting the Odissi of Guru Surendranath Jena* captures a *Tantric* world of magic and mysticism in the choreographic works of Odissi Guru Surendranath Jena. Analogous to Royo’s attempt to trace the influences of Tantrism in Odissi dance, I investigate the *Tantric* associations of the *Mahari* in a historical, choreographic, and theoretical inquiry in “*Mahari* in Ritual.”

¹³ The names used here are those of *Rasas* or aesthetic-emotional moods. According to the classification of *Rasas* in Bharata’s *Natyasastra*, the first Indian performing arts treatise written in the second century B.C., there are eight *rasas*, namely, *shringar* (love), *hasya* (humour), *adhbhuta* (wonder), *bir* (valor), *karuna* (compassion), *bhayanak* (fear), *bibhatsa* (revulsion). In the tenth century, Abhinavagupta, the most celebrated *Sanskrit* theoretician added a ninth, *shanti* (peace).

dangerous goddess were abundant in Odisha preceding the *Somavamsi-Kesaris* (“Development of the Natamandira” 36).

The strong hold of *Vaishnavism*, or the worshipping of Hindu male deity *Visnu*, was solidified with the building of the *Jagannath* temple in Puri. It was started by *Ganga* king Anantavarman Chodagangadeva and completed by his successor Ananga Bhima Deva from 1178 to 1198 C.E. The temple was pivotal to the development of *Odissi* dance since it enabled a sustained appointment of *Mahari* temple dancers as ritual specialists.¹⁴ *Gajapati* kings from the *Surya* dynasty ruled Odisha after the *Gangas*, during which *Odissi* dance reached its peak. Ramamnanda Ray—minister of *Gajapati* king Prataparudradeva, a devout *Vaishava* and the disciple of *Vaishnava* Guru Sri Chaitanya—taught temple-dancers in his play, *Jagannath Bhallav Natak* in 1509. The *Vaishnavite* influence prevails as the most dominant in contemporary Odisha.

The pre-colonial *Bhakti* movement of the sixteenth century, also a *Vaishnavite* construct, is the most significant religious development in contemporary *Odissi* where the devotee developed a personal relationship with the Hindu god *Krishna*. *Krishna* is another version of Hindu god *Visnu*. The *Bhakti* movement marked the large-scale development of *Vaishnavism*. The

¹⁴ Banerji argues that “the Jagannath cult emerged from tribal communities whose cosmologies were autonomous of orthodox Hinduism, but who were gradually absorbed into its pantheon through a contested process of social assimilation” (Banerji, “*Odissi* Dance,” 40).

movement started in south India in the sixth century and spread to the east from the beginning of the twelfth century gradually supplanting the previous *Saivite* orders of Odisha. *Bhakti* challenged Brahmin orthodoxy, caste hierarchy, and ritual worship by democratizing religion through its message of egalitarianism and proclaimed love as the basis for accessing the divine through an intimate and personal relationship.¹⁵

The *Gaudiya Vaishnavite* spiritual Guru, Chaitanya, also known as an incarnation of *Krishna*, brought the *Bhakti* movement to Odisha in the sixteenth century from Bengal. Chaitanya was an ardent devotee of *Krishna* who is the only Hindu male deity who shares the same mortal world as his devotees. *Krishna* lived in Mathura, Vrindavan, and Dwarka—all three of these are actual cities in modern India. In Odisha, worshipping *Krishna* became widespread since the writing of Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda* in the twelfth century although the centrality of *Krishna* in the *Bhakti* movement accentuated the convergence of the cult of *Jagannath* with the cult of *Krishna*. *Gaudiya Vaisnavism* values sentiment and embodiment of devotion, in which a spiritual union with *Krishna* is possible only when the devotee transforms into *Radha* by embodying the *Sakhi Bhava*, an understanding of the divine as a friend or a lover. Today, the performance of the *Gitagovinda* is the most virtuosic in the *Odissi* canon depicting the celestial love

¹⁵ Jainism and Buddhism had similarly flouted rules of high Brahminism in ancient India.

story between *Krishna* and his divine lover *Radha*. In this lyrical ballad, the sexual union of *Radha* and *Krishna* metaphorically emulates the devotional yearning of the *Bhakta* or devotee to merge with the divine. However, the *Bhakti* movement and its *Vaishnavite* paradigm supports the contemporary practice of *Odissi* as *Odissi* dancers often worship *Jagannath* as *Krishna* and vice versa.

Islam has a contentious relationship with *Mahari* dancing since it is alleged that under its influence the tradition suffered a considerable setback. The popular notion in South Asian historiography claims that with the advent of Islam through the Persian *Mughals*, there was a decline in dance in the region given the orthodox nature of Islam. The Hindu-Muslim binary coined by the Hindu nationalists wrongly pitch Hindus against Muslims and vice versa within the Indian national fabric, claiming that the Hindus are insiders and rightful descendants of India while distancing the Muslims as plunderers and invaders. In her dissertation, Banerji critiques the notion regarding the decline of dance with the advent of Islam as she shows how varying religious influences and political institutions altered the nature of dancing. She argues that dance continued in Odisha during this period mostly by the *Gotipuas*. This institution developed alongside a pattern of democratizing religion through the advent of the *Bhakti* movement.

Instituted in the sixteenth century during the Mughal era, the *Gotipuas* embodied *RadhaBhava* that is love for *Krishna*. The *Bhakti* movement in Odisha contributed to the institutionalizing of *Gotipua* dancing although different historians have different opinions about the origin of the *Gotipuas*. Veteran Odissi dancer, Ragini Devi argues that the *Maharis* lost their status to perform in the temples by dancing at the royal court of Khurda, and hence, *Gotipuas* were instituted to perform in the temples. Indian aesthetician, Mohan Khokar thinks that the *Gotipuas* performed outside the temples and had no connection to the temple, and were, hence, not substitutes for *Maharis*. Artist/ Academic Priyambada Mohanty Hejmadi finds a scandalous viewpoint in Gopal Chandra Praharaj's introduction to *Kabisurya Granthabali Jibanacharita*, the only existing document on the *Gotipuas*, pointing to the statement that "Oriyas created Gotipua troupes as an alternative to the vulgar dance of the Andhra prostitutes" (43). *Gotipua* and *Mahari* performances coexisted as institutionalized forms during the *Mughal* era although there are diverging theories about the origin of the *Gotipuas*. In any case, there is really little evidence showing that Islam hindered *Mahari* dancing in a direct encounter.

To understand the systematic marginalization of the *Mahari* dancing since the sixteenth century, it is pertinent to discuss the syncretic construction of *Mahari* ritual performance in the temples of Odisha and their connections to

Tantra. In practice by the tenth century, *Tantra* was a ritual and philosophical system that harnessed the divine energy within the human body considered to be the microcosm of the spiritual universe. Earlier in this section, I noted that *Tantrism* was practiced in Odisha since the eighth century. In fact, *Tantrism* and *Saktism* (worshipping the goddess *Sakti*) merged as the *Sakta Tantra* that ritually harnessed and channeled the eternal feminine principle, or *Sakti*, for spiritual liberation.

In her ethnographic encounter with the *Maharis* in Odisha, Anthropologist Frédérique Apffel-Marglin defines *Sakti* as a “female power, engendering both life and death in its temporal unfolding” (21). Unlike *Vaisnavite* religious practices that required high caste Brahmanical priests to perform ritual services,¹⁶ *Sakta Tantra* rituals were performed by *Tantrics* or ritual worshippers of *Sakti* (the eternal female principle) who deliberately broke the orthodox injunctions posed by the Brahmanical system. In the *Jagannath* temple, *Mahari* dance infused *Shakta Tantric* (goddess worship) into the *Vaishnavite* fold (the worship of Hindu male god Visnu). According to *Odissi* scholar-performer, Ratna Roy, *Mahari* dancing was a covert *Tantric* operation in an overt *Vaishnavite* program. Apffel-Marglin denotes that the *Mahari* dance was a ritual offering to *Jagannath* for

¹⁶ The Brahmins were highly patriarchal, conservative, and orthodox, preserving an unequal society in the name of religion.

Maithuna or sexual intercourse, as an integral component of the *Pancamakara* ritual using the five M's—"mamsa (meat), *matsya* (fish), *madya* (wine), *mudra* (usually said to be parched grain, but exact meaning much debated), and *maithuna* (sexual intercourse)" (Urban, *Power of Tantra*, 102). While these five elements were strictly forbidden to *Brahmin* orthodoxy but fully embraced by *Tantric* practices, they were metaphorically integrated through *Mahari* dance into *Jagannath* worship conducted by Brahmin priests in the temple. According to the *Shakta* tradition or the worshipping of the Goddess, the *Mahari* dance was called *Sakti Ucchista* or the leavings of *Kali* or *Sakti*. Apffel-Marglin writes that during the morning meal offering to *Jagannath*, the sole purpose of the dance was the secretion of sexual fluids "that were secreted from the vagina of the devadasi because of the movements that she performs during the dance" (240). The sexual connotations of *Mahari* dancing held primary importance in ensuring a healthy life-cycle in the Hindu ecosystem although they are completely obscured in the contemporary understanding of her ritual practice.

The confluence of the *Jagannath* cult with *Vaishnavism* around the sixteenth century led to the first instance of discrimination against the *Mahari* tradition as the Brahmin orthodoxy opposed the above life-affirming-sexually-suggestive *Tantric* practices. Archaeologist Kishore Chandra Panigrahi claims the homogenizing influence of the *Vaishnavite* cult with the *Bhakti* movement that

diminished the earlier religious influences in Odisha's religious fabric. In *Jagannath* cult, *Jagannath* is equated to *Visnu*, who is also another form of *Krishna*. The *Bhakti* movement with its apparent democratizing impulse establishing a personalized relationship with *Visnu/ Krishna/ Jagannath* became less tolerant of previous religious orders that incorporated the unorthodox *Tantric* practices. The *Bhakti* movement was also discriminatory towards the *Mahari* practice since the *Mahari* tradition covertly syncretized the dominant *Vaishnavism* with the underlying *Sakta Tantra*. When Shaivism was predominant in Odisha from the sixth to the tenth century, the *Sakta Tantra* influences could remain on the fringes. Donaldson argues that the advent of sixteenth century *Vaishnavism* leading to the iconization of the political ruler as *Vishnu's* descendant on earth was one of the reasons why *Mahari* performance became more and more restricted to the temple premises denoting more bodily control on the *Maharis* (*Hindu Temple Art of Orissa* 343). This is evidenced by the shift in temple architecture as the *Natamandira* (dancing-hall) was converted to *Bhogamandapa* (dining hall) and a new structure was squeezed in between the *Garba-Griha* (inner sanctum) and the *Bhogamandapa* (dining hall). Even though the *Vaishnavites* were the first to police, regulate, and control *Tantric* practices and sexuality in a repressive manner, the British colonizers labeled them

prostitutes as they could not comprehend the confluence of their sexuality with the divine realm.

The colonial era resulted in the production of discourse by European Christian missionaries, colonial officials, cultural reformers, anthropologists, and travelers who found sexual deviancy in the undomesticated sexuality of the *Maharis*. Colonial archivists quantified Indian subjects for greater ease in ruling them which led them to divide the *Maharis* according to the temple-duties (Grome 114; Webb 67). The statistics on the *Maharis* show their division based on their specific functions, such as *Bheetor Gauni*, *Bheetor Nachuni*, *Bahar Gauni*, and *Bahar Nachuni*. *Bheetor* and *Bahar* refer to inside and outside the temple premises respectively. *Gauni* and *Nachuni* are singers and dancers respectively. These classifications that were previously loosely maintained became reified as the centralized British administrative system started taking notice of every painstaking detail of the daily functioning of the *Jagannath* temple. What resulted was a centralized, quantified, and scientific discourse on the deviant temple-dancers that, though initially they were maintained in a separate status, were conflated with prostitutes from the beginning of the nineteenth century.

According to European accounts, the *Mahari* embodied decadent dispositions of sexuality of the Orient. The colonial accounts as available in travel

literature, Christian proselytization, and legal discourse associated the Odishan body with pathologized sexualities, degeneracy, and an enchanting, yet debased, temple dancer. The *Mahari*'s ritual role explicitly involving sexuality and her sexual life outside of social marriage made her ritual service unintelligible to the Victorian puritanical standards of sexuality that recognized female sexual acts only for procreative purposes within conjugal relationships. In 1815, a French missionary Abbe J.A. Dubois described *Mahari* dance as both vulgar and graceful with indecorous gestures (584). Dubois describes the *Mahari* ritual performance, saying "they execute with sufficient grace, although their attitudes are lascivious and their gestures indecorous. As regards their singing, it is almost always confined to obscene verses describing some licentious episode in the history of their gods" (584). In the colonial worldview, the *Mahari* conflated as the prostitute came to be known as sexually excessive, exotic, pernicious, and scandalous that was criminalized and pathologized. With the British occupation of the Indian subcontinent and the increasing circulation of Victorian notions of comportment, the *Mahari* body increasingly came to be known as sexually excessive needing to be saved, reformed, or erased.

The social reform movement of the nineteenth century, jointly spearheaded by the Indian nationalists who were seeking political independence and the Christian missionaries hoping to proselytize India, continued the colonial

conviction among the indigenous elites that in order to bring in modernity one must be freed of one's religious faith, especially the debilitating influences of left handed ritual practices, such as *Tantrism*. Abolishing temple-dancing was one of the main campaigns in this period via the Prevention of *Devadasi* Dedication Act. *Devadasi* is the pan Indian terminology of the temple-dancer known as *Mahari* in *Oriya*, the indigenous language of Odisha. This debate had a prominent presence in southern India, especially the Madras Presidency and it was extremely contested with multiple sides and issues. Mytheli Sreenivas, investigating the *Devadasi* reform movement in southern India, suggests "the attempt to recuperate devadasi histories necessarily confronts questions about patriarchal power and women's autonomy" (64). Sreenivas investigates discourses on *Devadasi* reform movement delineating how "heterosexual, monogamous conjugality in late-colonial discourses of feminism and nationalism" marginalized *Devadasi* sexuality as unacceptable (88). Sreenivas claims that the end of temple dedication through *Devadasi* reform often worsened their social, economic and cultural status.

Following Sreenivas, it is clear that the non-monogamous conjugality of the *Devadasis* made them illegible to the modern British educated Indian citizen who demanded their ostracization. I do not intend to claim that the *Devadasi* system was single-handedly emancipatory and non-patriarchal, given the obvious

lack of agency of women within the system, especially in the processes of initiation of under-age girls as young as five years old. However, I agree with Banerji when she makes a case for the *Mahari* by arguing that “female sexual autonomy was translated as sexual oppression to bolster colonial and nationalist projects of moral reform, regulation, and criminalization in relation to the dancing subject” (371). Although the legal injunctions of the *Madras* presidency did not directly influence the *Maharis* in Odisha, the social atmosphere, ridden with protests against the temple-dancing service, led to the closure of the system of appointing *Maharis* in the *Jagannath* temple. Even in the midst of clashes between indigenous and modern ways of the newly independent India, the male priests continued their service unhindered. The female ritual specialists and ritual performers were deemed dispensable without much consequence to the religious practice in the Hindu worshipping program.

The twentieth century project of instituting Indian classical dance further marginalized the contribution of the *Maharis* as dance became the prerogative of all and not restricted to only the temple-dancers. Their dancing was appropriated by emerging *Odissi* practitioners from middle class families with the institutionalization of *Odissi* as an Indian classical dance form. The construction of *Odissi* as an Indian classical dance form coincided with the nationalist project of establishing the ancient Indian cultural heritage to upend its suppression over

two centuries by the British colonizers. The all-male group of cultural reformers in Cuttack called *Jayantika* sealed the fate of present-day *Odissi* dance. These dancers reconstructed the dance from historical remnants emphasizing its textual connections to the ancient Hindu texts more so than the embodied lineage of the *Maharis* and the *Gotipuas*. Even amongst these two sections of historical practitioners, *Gotipuas* were privileged as the *Mahari* tradition fell into disrepute. The *Jayantika* leaders declared their affiliation to *Odissi* in blood, resulting in the establishment of *Odissi* as a classical dance form resulting in a momentous event expressing solidarity among the fraternity. They proclaimed *Odissi* to have divine origins and a linear history. According to this history, the dance mediated through the *Mahari* to the *Gotipua* and finally to the middle-class household.

Odissi's revival in the post-independence era was a Hindu nationalist political project and was far from being just an aesthetic exercise. It belonged to pan-Indian exercise of instituting regional dance forms' divine origins and bringing them to national notice as harbingers of the so-called rich-ancient-sacred-rigorous-textual Indian heritage. It is noted in the *Natyasastra* that the classical did not exist in separation to either the folk or the tribal in the Indian context. The term classical was an imposition of a Western hierarchy that existed between high art classical ballet and popular, and mainly cultural, folk dances. The *Jayantika* claimed to see an unbroken textual lineage of the dance form

tracing it from the *Sastric* (Hindu scriptural) texts, Maheswar Mohapatra's *Abhinaya Chandrika*, Abhinavagupta's *Abhinaya Darpanam*, and Bharata's *Natyasastra*.

Choreographers such as Uday Shankar and Rukmini Devi participated in the cultural renaissance of the 1920s that sought to build, construct, and idolize Indian artistic and cultural heritage based on a nostalgic belonging to the ancient past. The temple-dancers who were embodying the dances over the millennium negotiating the changing political climate, as discussed above, were sidelined and middle class dancers from 'respectable' households appropriated their dance forms. During the Indian nationalist regeneration of *Odissi* dance, the three prominent styles of *Odissi* were attributed to Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, Guru Debaprasad Das, and Guru Pankaj Charan Das. While the first two were *Gotipua* dancers in their childhood, Pankaj Charan Das was the adopted son of *Mahari* Ratna Prabha Devi. In a personal interview, his son Guru Sarat Kumar Das who continues the Pankaj Charan Das style of *Odissi* mentioned that his form was discriminated against since it belonged to the *Mahari* tradition. In the contemporary scenario, *Gotipua* dancing continues in its indigenous context in the village of Raghurajpur in Odisha while *Odissi* dancers appropriate the *Mahari* style usurping the *Maharis* in totality.

Here, I have shown the three pivotal historical situations that led to the gradual erasure of the *Mahari* body, namely the sixteenth century *Bhakti* revival, the nineteenth century British colonialism, and the twentieth century Indian nationalism. In this dissertation, I work against this historical marginalization and bring to light the sexually potent *Sakta Tantric Mahari* who has been tamed, neutered, and domesticated in the dancing *Odissi* body. The colonial pressure of stigmatizing the *Mahari* eventually led to the extinction of this system and yet, I find the sexually transgressive motifs of the *Mahari* in contemporary performance. In summation, I suggest that bringing the *Mahari* dance to the surface and center is a means of questioning the conservative construction of *Odissi*. I align my work with that of Banerji's "broad vision of Odissi, where innovations and experiments that contest Odissi's conventional techniques and challenge its religious claims can legitimately coexist with its traditional repertoire" (12). I argue that the *Mahari* body remains the latent destabilizing epicenter within *Odissi*, enabling deconstruction of embedded hierarchies and potentially reorienting the patriarchal horizon of *Odissi*. I explore *Tantric* connections between the *Mahari* and the *Alasa-Kanyas* as mentioned in the *Silpa Prakasa*, also a *Tantric* text. Further, I discover new connections between *Tantra*, movement, and the *Mahari* in choreographic and digital creations. The *Mahari* emerges in my body only with rigorous excavations that rid my dancing body of

its ornamentation, textualisation, and disembodiment of the Kelucharan Mohapatra style of *Odissi* technique in which I am trained. This emergence, I argue, is subversive for its queer, transgressive, and deconstructive properties. Below, I outline my PaR methodology to investigate, locate, and make manifest the *Mahari* via a combination of studio, digital, and theoretical practices.

METHODOLOGY

This dissertation is a Practice as Research (PaR) submission that focuses on the use of dance practice as a means of establishing links between historical and contemporary understandings. As a professional practitioner of a South Asian dance form with twenty-five years' experience, I connect my contemporary *Odissi* practice to the historical practice of the temple-dancer as one possible method to undo histories of appropriation. I combine theories of deconstruction in practice to deconstruct my *Odissi* training and complicate its foundational assumptions and embedded hierarchies. I imbricate theory and practice as proposed by leading PaR scholar Robin Nelson to present a holistic perspective on *Mahari* creative practice (*Practice as Research in the Arts*). By employing a Derridean deconstructive lens, I look for and theorize the intersections and departures of *Odissi* and *Mahari*.

I deploy a series of interlocking methods spanning studio improvisation, fieldwork in Indian temples, choreography, choreographic analysis, and digital

visualization of live movement to establish connections between historical movement and contemporary experience. In my practice, I demonstrate the difference embedded in *Odissi* technique that insists on continually policing the *Mahari*. I connect the canonical *Odissi* repertoire to *Mahari* ritual practice to articulate the similarities and differences between the two while commenting on the embodied performativity of the *Mahari*. I use the dance improvisation technique called Creative Articulations Process (CAP) to deconstruct my movement and to access the sensations within my conscious embodiment of the *Mahari* via her embodied twists of the *Meena-Dandas* (fish-walk gait) and *Tri Bhangas* (tri-bent posture with three distinct bends at the knees, waist, and neck). CAP establishes physical connections between my codified *Odissi* body and the *Mahari* through sensate encounters. My CAP findings influence my choreographic process which serves as a further method of knowledge creation. And bringing the *Mahari* to the surface through motion capture technology and animation, I complicate the binary dichotomy—embodiment and disembodiment.¹⁷

¹⁷ By showing means of accessing the physical movement of the *Mahari* within my *Odissi* body outside of its codifications, I complicate the notion of embodiment in the live dancing body. The textual associations of the *Natyasastra* and other texts prevent an embodied reading of the *Odissi* dancing body as movement reads as a textual exegesis. Getting rid of *Odissi*'s textual markers with the loss of gestural data, I suggest that my motion capture mediation exaggerates the physicality of the movement.

Studio Improvisation. This investigation prioritizes the embodied practice of the dance practitioner to reveal what remains within the dancing body as corporeal knowledge accessible through studio improvisation techniques. I use dance-scholar Vida Midgelow's structured improvisation routine called Creative Articulations Process (CAP) to access my *Odissi* body outside of its codified textual vocabulary to get as close as possible to the *Mahari* motility. My first encounter with studio-improvisation was alien since I was not used to engaging with movement through sensations or at least I never articulated sensations explicitly. Accessing embodiment, bodily inscriptions, and movement experiences sensorially through CAP, I surface the embodied *Mahari* lineages in my textually codified dancing body. I articulate the somatic markers and sensations by delving deep into bodily awareness. I examine my physical (formal, technical, injury-related), emotional, and mainly sensorial happenings within my dancing body. I improvise with the technical injunctions of my *Odissi* body to discover existing associations and create new connections to the temple-dancers. I improvise with the sculptural *Alasa-Kanyas* as another way to subvert the textual foundations of my relationship to *Odissi* technique. CAP questions every movement in a sensate manner enabling a rigorous examination of the normative within *Odissi*. This exercise provides language around the bodily-felt sensations that intersperses,

interrupts, and redirects my analysis throughout the dissertation. Through these archived sensations I evidence my embodied connections to the historical *Mahari*.

The six facets of CAP, namely, *Opening*, *Situating*, *Delving*, *Raising*, *Anatomizing*, and *Outwarding* provide a systematic means of accessing embodied knowledge. *Opening*, disconnects the moving body from its semiotic and linguistic significations such that the practitioner can enter a space of discursive non-knowing and bodily knowing by indulging into the sensate movement experiences. Hence, *Opening* begins my process of dissociating my training from the textual codifications to a corporeal realm that defies discursive articulations. *Situating* delineates the context of one's practice such as the historical and theoretical context of investigating the twist in the *Odissi* body. *Delving* makes visible the felt sensations in one's practice by seeking the anatomical origin, the angular deflections, the bodily orientation, and the oppositional motions, and the embodied resonances of my *Odissi* body. *Raising* provides space for visual, kinesthetic, aural, and emotional descriptions of bodily awareness. It is the first step of describing these felt sensations that comes only after a considerable engagement of resisting articulations in *Opening*, *Situating*, and *Delving*. *Anatomizing*, further, breaks these movements into somatic markers continuing to imagine multiple versions and iterations of my articulations "with openness, curiosity, and without judgment" (Bacon and Middelw 26). The last facet,

Outwarding entails the sharing of the discoveries within this improvisatory investigation as it asks me to notice the 'whatness' of this felt practice articulating its visual, aural, sensuous, and kinesthetic sensations (27). Together all six facets reorient the relationship to my codified *Odissi* technique by providing a “tool for embodied reflection, creativity, and languaging, giving rise to alternative, art, and artist-centered ways of being and writing” (28). This method was central to each of my core investigations and PaR outcomes.

Fieldwork: In the absence of actual *Mahari* bodies I explore the mythical connections between the *Mahari* and the sculptural *Alasa-Kanyas* by visiting the Hindu temples in Odisha to document the numerous *Alasa-Kanyas* adorning the exterior walls of these temples. I spent a summer among these sculptures available in temples in and around the capital city of Bhubaneswar, namely, *Brahmeswar, Mukteswar, Satrugghneswar, Rajarani, Chausat Yogini, Konarak,* and *Jagannath* temple. I observed, documented, and performed with the sculptures, emulating the *Tri Bhanga* stance of the *Alasa-Kanyas* by literally embodying the tri-bent curves of the sculptures. Images of these impressions are curated in my online compendium. In this fieldwork, I visited the *Natamandira* or the dancing hall of *Konarak* temple in which I practiced the *Meena-Danda*, fish-walk feeling the coarse texture and the friction of the stone ruins under my feet. When I returned to the studio spaces of the Department of Dance at The Ohio

State University, I transported these felt sensations to my experimental improvisations recreating them in my studio practice sessions. This experiential and image research formed the foundation of my choreographic methods.

Choreography and Choreographic Analysis. PaR scholar, Kim Vincs centralizes the unique physicality of her embodied practice in her choreographic research inspiring my methodology of creating and discovering knowledge through the process of choreography as method. I further my exploration of the historical, mythical, and sculptural *Mahari* using solo and group choreography in which I facilitate the generation of movement material through a creative meditation on the *Mahari*. I continue reimagining the *Mahari* as I create new material for solo and group choreography. The sculptural *Alasa-Kanyas* along with the *Mahari* ritual practice inform my creative reconstruction of the *Mahari* in my group choreography *Alasa-Kanya: Sculpture in Odissi* and my solo choreography *Meena-Danda* respectively. Both these pieces are choreographic outcomes of my PaR research process that accompany the written exegesis. Apart from the PaR choreographic outcomes, I also create a solo specifically for capturing it using motion capture technology. I incorporate the digital manipulations in 3D animation via *Motionbuilder* software into my choreographic explorations in my studio. In this choreographic research, I accentuate the embodied traces of the *Mahari* drawn from multiple sources.

Choreographic analysis is a methodology founded by the field of dance studies in which one analyzes movement for cultural and artistic markers. I use this method to analyze movement in my solo and group choreographies as well as to examine my choreography translated into 3D data in digital mediation. In the 3D environment of animation, my choreographed traces take on a different life than that in live performance. Choreographic analyses of canonical pieces from the *Odissi* repertory and their digital translation via motion capture technology allow for indicating visual, kinesthetic, and emotional connections between *Odissi* moves and its historically marginalized component, the *Mahari* aesthetic.

Digital Visualization. I use digital visualization as an analytical method to surface the *Mahari* body. I deploy motion capture technology to convert my movement into 3D data to analyze as well as visualize the historical *Mahari* in my movement. Digital mediation allows me to reorient the processes of meaning-making in conventional *Odissi* movement. by causing a decisive break from the textual codifications of *Odissi*. It repurposes the usage of the *Mudras* or hand gestures by repurposing their usage and allowing the digital environment to communicate differently from that of the live *Odissi* dancing body. For example, the skeletal mediation of my motion captured movement focuses attention to the physical movement of the body since by losing the finger movements, it is unable to represent the textual linkages established between the *Mudras* and their

codified usage in *Sanskrit* and *Oriya* texts. Expanding the sensorial investigation of the *Mahari* using CAP into the 3D perspective of the *Motionbuilder* software functioning as the interface between corporeal and digital movement provides a 360-degree access to my movement allowing for its choreographic analyses from multiple perspectives. At any single moment in time, a single movement presents infinite possibilities of representation and analysis. In this medium, one can break the entire sequence into small chunks, play backward or forward, transpose the movement onto 3D avatars, and create abstract visualizations of the movement to discover new patterns and possibilities.

In this dissertation, motion capture technology makes space for my intimate and radical engagement with technology that provides a philosophical grounding. Visualizing my embodied movement as a 3D skeletal body bereft of its *Odissi* accoutrements, jewelry, and textual associations, I argue, corresponds philosophically to the embodied *Mahari* body. The disornamented skeletal motion captured figure bereaves the ornate *Odissi* body of its gestural expressivity and facial communicability forcing the visual focus towards the physical movements. I read the act of disornamenting as the *Mahari*'s agency protesting her marginalization and continuing appropriation. *Odissi* dancers performing as the *Mahari* represent her as highly ornamented while scholars find her traces on the contemporary proscenium theater in the jewelry worn by the dancers. I resist this

object-oriented reification of the *Mahari* and the skeletal mediation, apart from being an analytical framework, philosophically grounds digital mediation as the historical mediation of the political *Mahari*.

Finally, mediation allows for the creative emanation of the *Mahari* via 3D animation sequences. While it is an excellent medium to analyze and conceptualize *Mahari* movement, it also can superimpose my motion captured data onto other digitally generated models in order to create digital artworks in 3D animation. The process of translation from my movement to data and to 3D animation objects present a wide-ranging possibility and freedom to infuse the digital translation of my *Odissi* movement with certain choices of the *Mahari*, such as accentuating the S-shaped curves and the twists of the digital body. Motion capture mediation, hence, has philosophical, analytical, and artistic purpose in this investigation to foreground the *Mahari* body within the overtly textual practices of *Odissi*.

Theory. I imbricate Derridean deconstruction in my studio practice where I use improvisatory, choreographic, and technological modes of deconstructing my dancing body.¹⁸ Deconstruction critically evaluates the relationship between text and meaning by reading the text counter to the underlying intended unity of the

¹⁸ Throughout my process, I imbricate the deconstructive appeal of Derrida that refrains from fixing meaning by showing the traces of traces of traces that keep exploring multivalence in signification in an area of knowledge. The *Mahari* becomes the differing-deferring gesture in my *Odissi* body through the constant movement of the so-called center as Jagannath and the so-called margin as *Mahari*.

text. It mistrusts the given unity between the signifier and the signified by breaking down the structural unity of language systems. Derrida asserts that “deconstruction cannot limit or proceed immediately to a neutralization: it must...practice an overturning of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system. It is only on this condition that deconstruction will provide itself the means with which to intervene in the field of oppositions that it criticizes, which is also a field of non-discursive forces” (*Writing and Difference* 328). It is pertinent to note that deconstruction is not about tearing down a set of binary opposition, light and dark, presence and absence, and speech and writing where there is inherent hierarchy of the first over the second, to only re-inscribe another binary dichotomy. Instead, deconstruction dissolves the binary system by identifying the in-between and the marginalized non-discursive forces that make binary signification possible to begin with. While deconstruction enables Derrida to recognize the infinite tracing that questions the pre-assigned hierarchies between centers and margins in language, it empowers me to explore the modalities of communication in my dance practice. I displace the centrality of *Jagannath* by introducing the spectral figure of the historical *Mahari*. She emerges as the deconstructive epicenter in the dancing body reorienting, differing, and deferring the patriarchal modalities of *Odissi*.

I keep my *Odissi* dancing body at the center of this deconstructive investigation where I explore the embodiment of the *Mahari* through a systematic dissolution of my studio practice of existing *Odissi* repertoire. I deconstruct the textual codifications of the *Odissi* body to access the embodied dimensions of the *Mahari* by using dance improvisation routines to articulate the sensations in my dancing body. I improvise upon my *Odissi* practice to find in it the traces of the historical, sculptural, and sexual *Mahari*. Through the *Meena-Danda* (fish-walk), a twisting movement that has not been named yet in *Odissi*, I find a break between the highly codified dimensions of *Odissi* movement. I work through the specifics of the twist in my practice of the *Meena-Danda* in the studio to punctuate the codified *Odissi* body by the sentient *Mahari* body. The twist has not been named within the indigenous codified vocabulary of *Odissi*. I discover a gap in the textualized technicity of *Odissi* movement where I can possibly locate the historical mediation of the *Mahari*. Equating this impulse with Derridean writing, I suggest that centers and margins dance around one another in an infinite tracing process within *Odissi* if and when the *Mahari* is surfaced. Hence, theory is imbricated in my dance practice and not simply a way to rationalize my practice after the event.

Nelson claims that his “use of ‘praxis’ is intended to denote the possibility of thought within both ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ in an iterative process of ‘doing-

reflecting-reading-articulating-doing” (Nelson 32). In a similar strategy, theory and practice function together as a continuous loop in my methodology where I deconstruct my practice not from the outside but from the very core of my *Odissi* dancing body supported by the *Mahari*. Hence, my conventional *Odissi* dance practice (also known as *Sadhana*) combines with the dual processes of improvisatory CAP and technological motion capture (also known as Mocap) to wake the *Mahari* body always already inherently latent within the spinal undulations of *Odissi*.

I will end my methodology by explaining the various components of my PaR dissertation that centers the sentient body in visual representations alongside the written exegesis. My creative outcomes complementing this written document are a solo and a group choreography, an online compendium, and a series of 3D animations demonstrating the multi-modal nature of my research process. Following Nelson’s instructions regarding the multi-modal PaR submission as quoted below (26), I include the following pattern for presenting my findings with the central intent to surface the *Mahari*.

1. Product: “a product (exhibition, film, blog, score, performance) with a *durable record* (DVD, CD, video)” (Nelson 26).

For the dissertation, I make three creative outcomes that creatively investigate and manifest new knowledge of the *Mahari*. They are, 1) a solo performative

reconstruction and reimagining of *Mahari* ritual called *Meena-Danda*; 2) a choreographed group dance called *Alasa-Kanya: Sculpture in Odissi*; and 3) a series (*Iteration I, II, III*) of 3D animation sequence called *Out-ing Mahari: Sculptural Fragments* created in collaboration with animator Steve Conroy and using my motion capture performance data. All three exist online as durable documents.

2. Documenting Process: “documentation of process (sketchbook, photographs, DVD, objects of material culture)” (Nelson 26).

I outline my artistic process of surfacing the *Mahari* in an online compendium available

u.osu.edu/Mahari to accompany my chapters of the same names. These documentations of process articulate the steps I deploy in this dissertation research to excavate and reanimate *Mahari* presence in live performance and in the digital realm. I include visuals in the form of images and videos from various stages of my artistic research. Pictures from fieldwork in Odisha, motion capture data, and rehearsals with my cast for *Alasa-Kanya: Sculpture in Odissi* explicate visually the different steps deployed in my process. I also include journal entries, CAP reflections, and rehearsal notes. Finally, I include the three PaR products: *Meena-Danda*, *Alasa-Kanya: Sculpture in Odissi*, and *Out-ing Mahari: Sculptural Fragments* in u.osu.edu/mahari.

3. Complementary Writing: “‘complementary writing’ which includes locating practice in a lineage of influences and a conceptual framework for the research” (Nelson 26).

Alongside the creative products and process documentation, I include a written supplement articulating the conceptual frameworks of my dissertation and presenting an exegesis of my creative process. I ground my theories and methods in poststructuralist theories of deconstruction. This writing acts as the Derridean supplement that simultaneously adds and substitutes (*Of Grammatology* 142). In line with contemporary PaR standards, it refrains from philosophizing and conceptualizing the components of artistic practice—performance, choreography, and animation—while at the same time, it stands as an indispensable component of these products. The writing directs attention towards practice by showing the ways in which both the theory and the practice are indispensable for a complete understanding of the subversive *Mahari*. Like the Derridean notion of supplement, this piece of writing simultaneously adds and substitutes the product refuting a binary linkage between them. In this dissertation, both the product and the writing are incomplete without one another and they need each other to suffice their lack. I describe my inquiry into the imagined subjectivity of the *Mahari* via a kinesthetic re-embodiment and a re-membling of history. I also provide the

historical and religious backdrop from which modern-day *Odissi* emerges to establish my analysis from within the originary context of *Mahari* dancing.

In the following section, I outline the chapters of this dissertation where I use *Sadhana*, CAP, and Mocap to deconstruct and reconstruct the *Mahari* in the *Odissi* dancing body.

CHAPTER OUTLINES

In “*Mahari* in Ritual,” I explore *Mahari* ritual performance in the *Jagannath* temple in Odisha through its traces in my embodied *Odissi* repertory trained in canonical choreographies by Gury Kelucharan Mohapatra. The *Mahari* dancing body in the Odishan temples combined ritual, religion, and aesthetics during her performance in her daily ritual worship. During the morning ritual in the *Jagannath* temple called the *Sakhala Dhupa*, she performed pure dance with rhythmic accompaniment for the general devotees. She sang and gesticulated to the romantic verses of the *Gitagovinda* in the evening ritual called *Pahuda Alati*. Through my training in *Odissi* in both pure dance (*Nritta*) and expressive dance (*Abhinaya*), I perform excerpts from her ritual dancing although I have never before credited the *Mahari* tradition. Instead, I have always credited the choreographer, mostly Kelucharan Mohapatra whose style of *Odissi* has been the foundation of my training. To undo this appropriation, I infuse my *Odissi* practice with Frederique Apffel-Marglin’s ethnographic reading of *Mahari* ritual to

excavate the traces of *Mahari* performance. Using tenth century theologian and metaphysician, Abhinavagupta's writing on *Tantric* ritual, I establish the sexually transgressive potential of the *Mahari* performance that pushes beyond the domesticated sexuality of the contemporary *Odissi* body. Abhinavagupta conceived of the world as a gradual unfolding of a cosmic dramatic performance where the aesthetic and the spiritual experiences intersect at the somatic experience of carnal orgasm in a *Tantric* ritual. I let *Mahari* ritual performance and Abhinavagupta converse at the confluence of religion and aesthetics. I show how the *Sakta Tantric* core of *Mahari* performance complicates the male-centered outlook of *Odissi* that is premised on *Mahari* devotional supplication to *Jagannath*. I argue that *Mahari* ritual performance remains a latent transgressive force within *Odissi* movement otherwise overdetermined and overidentified with *Jagannath*. I conclude that the significance of *Mahari* performance lies in her ability to complicate the patriarchal focus and neutered performativity of *Odissi*. The PaR component of this chapter is a performative demonstration called *Meena-Danda*, in which I encapsulate my findings of the *Mahari* within the contemporary *Odissi* body.

In "*Mahari* in Choreography," I discuss the choreographic process and outcome of my twelve-minute group piece called *Alasa-Kanya: Sculpture in Odissi* (AK) performed by the undergraduate students of Kenyon College in which

I explicitly surface the *Mahari* in an attempt to overturn the patriarchal center occupied by *Jagannath*. I use the structured improvisation procedure called Creative Articulations Process (CAP) to generate choreographic prompts from the sixteen sculptural *Alasa-Kanyas* that vary according to moods, tasks, and personalities. Sculpted in *Tri Bhanga* or the tri-bent posture, the *Alasa-Kanyas* provide a window to the ancient and the medieval world of temple-dancing in stone, simultaneously connecting to the contemporary *Odissi* bodies given *Tri Bhanga* is the most characteristic feature of modern day *Odissi*. Given the prominent role of sculpture in the creation of *Odissi* writ large, these sculptural referents provide a means of accessing the *Mahari* latent within the *Odissi* body as a practical deconstructive maneuver.

Following Robin Nelson's call for praxis, I imbricate Jacques Derrida's theories of deconstruction as I deconstruct the *Alasa-Kanyas* in studio experimentations using CAP. I conceptualize my *Odissi* movement as being historically written and rewritten by the *Mahari* despite her subordinate status in *Odissi*. To counter the historical marginalization of the *Mahari* by my *Odissi* dancing body, I maintain a choreographic distance with the final material performed on stage for *AK* by allowing the students to create movement within the foundational containers of the *Chauka* and the *Tri Bhanga* using my choreographic scores from the *Alasa-Kanyas*. In fact, the *Mahari* presents the

opportunity to reimagine *Odissi* as having a fluid serpentine core that morphs into multiple variants without a necessary power hierarchy between gender: both mortal and divine. Here, the PaR document is a video of the live performance of *Alasa-Kanya: Sculpture in Odissi*, as presented to audiences in Kenyon College, Ohio in 2016.

In “*Mahari* in Mediation,” I work with 3D animation to digitally surface the *Mahari* in my movement. I use motion capture technology to digitize my movement into data that, in turn, animates 3D computer generated models. These models move with the 3D algorithmic translations of my embodied motion while introducing other motions made possible in the technological environment of digital animation. Here, I manually accentuate the serpentine gestures of the *Mahari* in the 3D visualizations of my *Odissi* movement, namely *Iteration I, II, & III*. Also, I collaborate with professional animator, Steve Conroy to create *Out-ing Mahari: Sculptural Fragments* that nuance the manifestation of the imbrication of the sculptural *Alasa-Kanyas* and the *Mahari Meena-Danda*. The historical mediation of the *Mahari* through digital mediation nuances my understanding of mediation that acts as a strange encounter between live dancing, stone sculpture, and computational processes. This bizarre coming together of eclectic mediums and timelines makes it difficult to reify and define the digital outcome. It adds to my movement while simultaneously substituting my motion with its silicon

processing. In this way, it internalizes the Derridean supplement that adds as it substitutes. This strange phenomenon is well captured by the term uncanny as the incomprehensible familiarity of the *Mahari* in the motion capture framework is such a ‘maddening supplement.’ I argue that mediation of my *Odissi* body as the *Mahari* is uncanny at best since like the uncanny it is “never simply a question of a statement, description or definition, but always engages a performative dimension, a maddening supplement, something unpredictable and additionally strange happening in and to what is being stated, described or defined” (Royle, 16). I deepen my examination of the digitized dancing body by adding Katherine Hayles’s ideas of embodiment through the practices of inscription and incorporation. According to Hayles, inscription is the hallmark of Cartesian mind-body divide by being a stereotypical rendition of embodiment while incorporation is the individual’s means of marking one’s presence. Using Hayles, I surface the *Mahari* incorporations within my digitized *Odissi* movement in the motion capture framework. The question of my historical mediation of the *Mahari* finds another outlet in digital mediation that is also central to the conceptual framework in this project—demonstrating the ever-elusive inter-modal, interdisciplinary, and multivalent nature of the *Mahari*. The PaR component of my creative inquiry with motion capture technology is the 3D animation called *Out-ing Mahari: Sculptural*

Fragments that resulted from the collaborative endeavor between digital artist Steve Conroy and myself.

I conclude my dissertation by foregrounding the artistic potential of the *Mahari* known through my creative explorations of invoking and surfacing the *Mahari*. I argue that the controlling of hips is an attempt to purge *Odissi* from *Mahari* influence although the purging is forever incomplete and made impossible by the haunting of the *Mahari*. Although, I recognize a few characteristic movements of the *Mahari* as her signature moves, I refrain from reifying her in particular gestures, postures, steps, and movements or attributing her a dance-style. Instead, I focus on her political import and argue that the *Mahari* remains a subversive possibility in the conservative portrayal of *Odissi* in contemporary high art venues. I show how movement implicates both history and contemporaneity in a visual economy that transcends across genres and mediums. The *Mahari Meena-Danda* metaphorically imbricates theory and practice in intersecting sinusoidal curves that center the historically marginalized practice to decenter contemporary patriarchal institutions. Technology is understood as a continuum from *Odissi* technique to sculpture to digital mediation. Technology is not just an instrument to convert, manipulate, or mediatize movement; it becomes a conceptual grounding for this PaR investigation of embodied practice. I articulate the interdisciplinary nature of this PaR methodology bringing together

critical theory, religion, dance, performance, choreography, and 3D animation.

Existing in an infinitely mobile loop, theory and practice informs my invocation, celebration, surfacing, and proliferating the *Mahari* within my *Odissi* dancing body and its choreographic and digital mediations.

Chapter 2: *Mahari* in Ritual¹⁹

This chapter is the written supplement for my PaR component in performance in which I recreate *Mahari* ritual praxis in Hindu temples of Odisha in a solo performative investigation.

Name: *Meena-Danda* (Work in Progress) (2017)

Date of Creation: September 2016 - May 2017

Venue: Department of Dance, The Ohio State University, Ohio

Length: 7 minutes

Description: In this performance, I give an overview of *Mahari* performativity and its relationship to *Odissi* technique. I creatively deploy the pure dance and expressional elements of *Mahari* ritual performance contesting the received notions of unskilled dancing by the *Mahari*.

Durable Document: It is documented in u.osu.edu/Mahari and digital file.

1. Practice as Research (PaR) investigates scholarly research questions through creative practice to develop new modes of knowing and create new knowledge. PaR scholar Paul Carter extends the subjective and relational dimensions of studio practice to what he calls “material thinking” that creates new relations of knowledge. This written thesis investigating Hindu ritual praxis will be accompanied by a PaR embodied investigation in the form of a video recording and documentation of my practice in u.osu.edu/Mahari. My practice complements my written excavation of historical *Mahari* practice. Through my PaR engagement, I access the *Mahari* ritual dancing in the *Jagannath* temple.

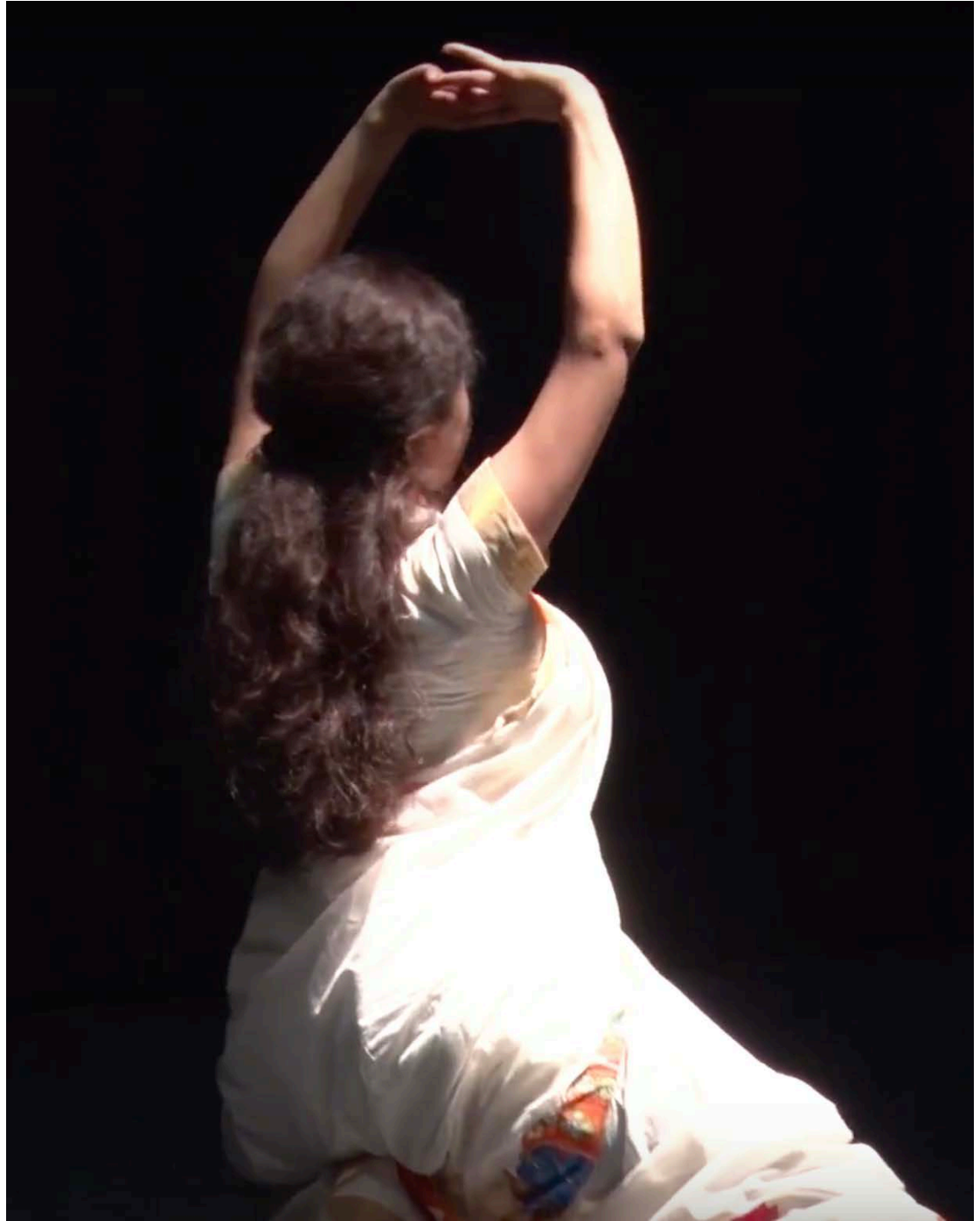


Fig. 1. Screen shot in *Batu* from PaR Outcome: *Meena-Danda*.

To continue surfacing the *Mahari*, in this chapter, I establish embodied connections between my contemporary *Odissi* practice and historical *Mahari* ritual practice.²⁰ Given the scarce traces of the *Mahari*, I cycle through three sources containing fragmentary evidence of *Mahari* movement and weave them together.²¹ I look for evidence in *Given to Dance*, the documentary film spearheaded by anthropologist Frederique Apffel-Marglin and directed by Ron Hess, which bears the only visual traces of *Mahari* movement. Along with these visual remnants of the *Mahari*, I draw from Apffel-Marglin's descriptions of the morning and evening rituals in the *Jagannath* temple²² and, I excavate my *Odissi* practice to find the residues of the *Mahari* body in canonical *Odissi* repertory. I argue that past recreations of the *Mahari* privilege *Mahari* ornamentation over her movements and that the canonical *Odissi* repertoire tends to erase the ritual history while simultaneously benefiting from it. I suggest that the *Mahari* ritual

²⁰ I address *Mahari* ritual performance in present tense to show its relevance and mediation within the contemporary concert practices of the dancing *Odissi* body. However, the ritual performance in the Hindu temples of Odisha has stopped since the middle of the twentieth century and middle class dancers have appropriated the movement from the *Mahari* to showcase their artistic talents in the proscenium theater.

²¹ South Asian studies scholar, Devesh Soneji's ethnographic work on the contemporary performative experiences of South Indian temple-dancers called *Unfinished Gestures* inspires my examination of the dancing body of the *Mahari* tradition. My work differs from Soneji's as I engage with, reconstruct, and surface the *Mahari* through my corporeal experience.

²² I build my analysis based on *Odissi* dancer and cultural anthropologist, Frederique Apffel-Marglin's reading of *Mahari* ritual practice. For the morning ritual, I consult both *Wives of the God King* and *Rhythms of Life* whereas for the evening ritual, I concentrate on the former.

lies latent in my moving body and, when it is invoked, it can complicate the patriarchal center within *Odissi*.

Ritual forms an integral component in this dissertation because *Mahari* movement did not exist in isolation. Historically, *Mahari* movement constituted part of the ritual worshipping practices of the *Jagannath* temple. The *Mahari* performed daily during the mid-day meal and the bed-time rituals and also danced during important religious festivals, such as *Chandan Jatra*, *Jhulan Jatra*, and *Ratha Jatra*. She danced in the mornings and evenings during the daily ritual practice. In the morning, she danced while male Hindu priests ritually fed the gods. In the evening, she performed when they prepared the beds for the gods retiring for the day. *Mahari* ritual dancing was an embodied offering by the *Mahari* to her divine consort, *Jagannath*. *Odissi* exponent and dance-scholar Anurima Banerji conceives of the *Mahari* ritual contribution of movement as an ineffable gift to *Jagannath* inalienable from her dancing body (“Dance and the Distributed Body” 25). Hence, *Mahari* ritual practice was an embodied practice and movement constitutes a principal component of its significance and the signifying process.

Her body in motion was the means of her ritual practice that was at the confluence of *Vaishnavism* (worshipping male Hindu god *Visnu*) and *Sakta Tantra* (worshipping female Hindu goddess *Sakti*). In *Tantric* tradition, in

particular, movement has significance either as an ingredient or as ritually signifying the symbolic divine union of the male god *Siva* and the female goddess *Sakti*. Tenth century Indian philosopher, Abhinavagupta's treatises on *Tantra* views the human body as the microcosm of the continual transcendent union between *Siva* and his consort *Sakti* (Muller-Ortega 136). *Mahari* ritual performance animates that transcendent union. I have mentioned earlier that scholar Ratna Roy argues that the *Mahari* performance is a covert *Tantric* (goddess worship) operation in an overt *Vaishnavite* (male center) paradigm ("Mahari Dance" 28). Expanding Roy's claim by examining the movement vocabulary and the bodily orientations of *Mahari* dancing, in this chapter, I show that the *Mahari* embodies the divine union via interrupting the centrality of the male divinity and constantly redefining the spiritual core in ritual practice.

In this chapter, I build on work done previously by scholars including Ratna Roy and Frederique Apffel-Marglin who have also reconstructed *Mahari* ritual performance. Based on her choreographic analysis Roy characterizes *Mahari* performance as an outpouring of the soul, braiding performative movement and devotional aura ("Pancha Kanya" 5).²³ In her ethnographic

²³ I have noted in my "Introduction" that Pankaj Charan Das was the adopted son of *Mahari* Ratnaprabha Devi. He continued the *Mahari* lineage in his choreographies of *Odissi* that were performed by his students namely, Priyambada Mohanty-Hejmadi, Ratna Roy, and Ritha Devi. Discussing Pankaj Charan style of *Odissi* is beyond the scope of my dissertation since I focus on my training and practice of Kelucharan Mohapatra style of *Odissi*.

investigation of the *Maharis* in Odisha, Apffel-Marglin argues that *Mahari* dance is the ritual embodiment of auspiciousness and fertility necessary for the smooth running of the Hindu life-world. Both Apffel-Marglin and Roy are *Odissi* practitioners but their movement descriptions remain quite diffuse. They do not tie their embodied experiences to *Mahari* ritual performance. I find this creates a huge gap in the field of *Odissi* to which I can contribute.

As a practitioner, I feel the need to acknowledge the *Mahari* in my body in order to reconstruct *Mahari* performativity in and through my movement practice and movement description. To do so, I establish direct links between my practice and that of the *Mahari*. I also focus on Apffel-Marglin's descriptions of the *Mahari's* morning and evening rituals in the *Jagannath* temple, to which I bring my performative experiences. Having experienced the expressive and percussive elements of *Mahari* movement in my *Odissi* training, I ask the following research questions: How can my training in *Odissi* throw light on *Mahari* dance? From my practice of the *Odissi* repertoire, what can I conclude about *Mahari* performance? What are the sensory and kinesthetic dimensions that characterize *Mahari* ritual performance? How does it feel? Why is it useful to understand *Mahari* performance and in what ways can it contribute to *Odissi* practice? In the process of researching these questions, I discover that her ritual performance combining movement, music, rhythm, and devotion maneuvers and nudges the definitional

constructs of both dance and religion in dance studies and religious studies respectively. *Mahari* ritual transgresses the strict definitions of dance and religion since her physical maneuvering transgresses the strictly religious constructions of her performativity while her devotional gesticulation and singing questions the understanding of her dance practice simply as movement.

My own experience of dancing *Odissi* connects me to the performative elements that were components of *Mahari* ritual practice, such as *Nritta* (pure dance) and *Abhinaya* (expressional movement). Each time I start an *Odissi* performance, I enter the stage using the fish-walk gait or *Meena-Danda* that the *Mahari* used in her temple ritual performance. I pay my respect to *Jagannath* through an offering of flowers (*Puspanjali Pradan*) to either a wooden idol of *Jagannath* placed downstage right or an imaginary *Jagannath* in the front. Depending on the piece, I perform combinations of rhythmic *Nritta* and expressional *Abhinaya*. *Nritta* or pure dance was a part of the morning ritual performance of the *Mahari* as danced to the rhythmic variations of percussive accompaniment. *Abhinaya* or expressive performance was a component of the evening ritual where the *Mahari* sang the lyrics of the *Gitagovinda* while deploying her hands to express through facial expressions and hand gestures. In my contemporary *Odissi* performance, live musical accompaniment or audio recordings substitute the *Mahari* vocalization of the *Gitagovinda*. Nevertheless, I

continue to transmit the rhythmic and expressive movement vocabulary of the *Mahari* in my performance as well as practice.

While there are similarities, there are also revealing differences between my concert *Odissi* practice and historical ritual. *Mahari* Sashimani Devi says that she dedicates her dance to her divine husband *Jagannath* (*Given to Dance*). When she sings and enacts the words through hand gestures, I argue that she communicates with *Jagannath* in a romantic encounter. While my performance is two-dimensional and frontal usually for a third person audience, the *Mahari* performance was a personal conversation between herself and her divine consort that also had ritual significance. In her study of the body of the temple-dancer from southern India, dance-scholar Priya Srinivasan argues that the temple-dancer protected the deity by placing her body in between the god and the mortal devotees. Srinivasan continues to elaborate by claiming that the temple-dancer navigated both the mortal and the divine planes. She, and not the male priest, was most suitable to use her corporeal body for her divine service. Srinivasan is attracted to excavate this fleshy corporeality of the temple-dancer that often gets encoded with religious and cultural symbolism. Treading along Srinivasan's path, I postulate that the *Mahari* performance did not anticipate an audience although she always had one. During the morning ritual, she performed in the *Natamandira* or the dancing hall where her audience consisted of devotees. During the evening

ritual, she performed at the intersection of the *Natamandira* and the *Garbagriha* or the inner sanctum, in which her audience was the gods themselves. As I perform a solo *Odissi* piece involving multiple characters in the proscenium theatre, my bodily orientation determines whether I am referring to *Jagannath* as the first-person devotee, to the audience as the third person narrator, or to another character in second person. Indian classical dance is always subjective and contextual, and it locates each character for a specific instant in time that shifts instantaneously given the requirements of the piece (Asha Coorlawala, “It Matters for Whom You Dance” 65).

Despite these strong connections between *Odissi* dance and *Mahari* ritual, the historical marginalization of the *Mahari* since the sixteenth century has categorically erased the traces of *Mahari* ritual performance as I have explained in the “Introduction.” The erasure was so complete that even the death of the last surviving *Mahari* Sashimani Devi did not spur any celebrations of the millennia long tradition of ritual performance in the *Jagannath* temple. The last appointment in the temple was during the 1950s. Arts scholar Reena Ghadei notes that *Mahari* Kokila Prabha was the last officially appointed *Mahari* at the temple (“A Genesis of Mahari Dancing Tradition” 25). However, the system unofficially ended with the unceremonious death of the last surviving *Mahari*, Sashimani Devi in 2015, reported by Ellen Barry. Unlike the celebrated birth and death

ceremonies of the male *Odissi* revivalists who had declared their allegiance to the classical dance form of *Odissi* in blood in 1958, Devi's death did not matter in the world of *Odissi*. After her death, no memorial services or celebrations commemorated her passing away. Even my own *Odissi* community failed to appropriately honor Devi when she died.

The marginalization of the ritual practices and role of the *Mahari* is also evident in the continued absence of the *Mahari* body in the recreations of the *Mahari* in the *Mahari* style of *Odissi*. *Odissi* dancers recreate *Mahari* dancing on concert stages with the intent to remember, celebrate, commemorate, and acknowledge the *Mahari* lineage, but they do so by focusing on representing the ritual aura of the *Mahari* through costuming, ornamentation, and text. Dance-scholar Alessandra Lopez Royyo critiques this fabrication of *Mahari* ritual for concert performances as deploying the same strategies that marginalized the *Mahari* in the first place. She writes, “classicized and refashioned to reflect a re-imagined temple ritual—though clearly not equivalent with it—with the dancer taking on the persona of a temple dancer, in the contemporary imaginary the *Odissi*/*Mahari* equation still holds strong, at all levels, playing down the input from other sources” (“The Reinvention of *Odissi* Classical Dance as a Temple Ritual” 271). This reconceptualization is often called the *Mahari* style of *Odissi*. *Odissi* dancers perform as the *Mahari* by dressing up as the *Mahari* with elaborate

floral head décor and floral garlands. These dancers recreate *Mahari* dancing by emphasizing only the devotional elements within *Odissi*. They exploit the emotional, personal, and romantic relationship between the *Mahari* and *Jagannath*.

Since the *Mahari* performed to the divine as her ritual consort, the current representation of the *Mahari* by the contemporary *Odissi* dancer replicates the communicational style of *Mahari* dancing. *Odissi* dancer Kasturi Patnaik provides one such instance as she recreates the temple scenario for televised recording that was broadcast on Indian national television. Here, Patnaik dresses up as *Jagannath's* bride by covering herself with extensive jewelry. She performs to the *Sanskrit* (an ancient Indian language) lyrics of the *Gitagovinda* while showing the specifics of the evening ritual worshipping practices. As another initiative of enlivening the *Mahari*, Guru Sarat Kumar Das, disciple and son of Pankaj Charan Das who belonged to the *Mahari* household, organizes annually the *Mahari Nrutya Samaroha* or *Mahari* dance festival. During her delineation of the *Mahari*, Suhag Nalini Das dresses up as the *Mahari* performing to poems in *Oriya* (regional language of Odisha) written by the *Mahari* Dunguri Devi. Das's depiction of the *Mahari* using lyrics written by one of the *Maharis* has given the song a personal touch while still bringing out its regional ethos. However, I argue that both Das and Patnaik subsume the representation of the *Mahari* within their

Odissi vocabulary. Their depictions of *Mahari* dancing translate to a costuming convention and an adherence to the textual and, they do not dig down to the movement itself. They continue to reify the *Mahari* within *Odissi* as a mute non-creative force that can come alive only by the touch of *Odissi*. While I consider the costuming and the accompanying lyrics as important components of *Mahari* performance, I believe these elements perpetrate the dismissal of the laboring artistic body of the *Mahari*. The object or textual associations of *Mahari* dancing refuse to give her due credit as a moving body.

Concerned by the easy disposal of the *Mahari* as an artist,²⁴ in this chapter I excavate *Mahari* movement and its significance in two important rituals. I will examine the morning and the evening ritual performance of the *Mahari* in the *Jagannath* temple using the three sources: the film, *Given to Dance*, Apffel-Marglin's verbal descriptions, and my embodied practice in *Odissi*. The film *Given to Dance* and Apffel-Marglin's detailed descriptions of *Mahari* ritual performance in the *Jagannath* temple help me to connect my embodied movement practice to the embodied dance practice of the *Mahari*. The third source is my training in the canonical repertoire of *Odissi*.²⁵ I will show that in the

²⁴ Ann Cooper Albright's insistence on discovering the physicality of Loie Fuller's dancing instead of simplistically discarding the conventional notion of Fuller as a non-serious dancer justifies my project in seeking the *Mahari* physical practice despite her rejection by the *Odissi* dancers.

²⁵ For this, I look to the work of Allesandra. dance-scholar Royyo who while describing *Odissi* Guru Surendranath Jena's choreography, shows that Jena makes pieces that are based on the transgressive *Mahari* tradition drawing from *Tantric* principles ("Guru Surendranath Jena: Subverting the Reconstituted

Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra style of *Odissi* dance, the *Mahari* persists despite the policing by the form practiced in the name of technique. Before I start looking at the rituals individually, I describe each of my sources in greater detail below.

My first source is the fleshy *Mahari* body performing for camera as recorded in the documentary *Given to Dance*. In *Given to Dance*, Sashimani Devi performs snippets of her ritual performance for the film recording that allow me to compare her dancing to the *Odissi* canon. She performs a pure dance or *Nritta* section as well as an expressive segment or *Abhinaya*. Her movements resemble what we do today as *Odissi* practitioners, although they vary in execution. For example, there are instances during her rhythmic dances, or *Nritta*, in which she poses in the recognizable *Odissi* postures, namely, the *Tri Bhanga*, a tri-bent posture with distinct bends at the knees, waist, and neck (Appendix II: Figure I) and the *Chauka*, a square squatting posture with a broad pelvic floor (Appendix II: Figure II). However, unlike her *Odissi* counterpart, she does not worry about being as upright, frontal, and presentational in her posturing. When she performs expressional segments while simultaneously singing the lyrics of the song, she enacts the words using hand gestures. In my execution of *Abhinaya* or expressional movement, I perform to recorded music or live musical

Odissi Canon”). Jena denounces existing *Odissi* repertoire because he thinks of the canon as domesticating the transgressive dimensions of *Mahari Tantric* practice.

accompaniment deploying a nuanced but abundant gestural vocabulary that constantly refers to the text. It does not translate the words with a one-on-one gestural language. There is a much denser association between lyrics and movement in *Odissi*, and she gestures intermittently and does not translate every single word sung into her gestural vocabulary. Devi's execution of *Nritta* and *Abhinaya* during the morning and evening rituals respectively reminds the viewer of these components executed periodically within *Odissi*. Hence, I hold dear these few minutes of *Mahari* dance as recorded for *Given to Dance* to contrast Sashimani Devi's *Mahari* dancing with my *Odissi* movements. These moments of *Mahari* dancing provide *Mahari* movement by the *Mahari* herself unlike her representation that we see in the current scenario.

Frederique Apffel-Marglin's groundbreaking ethnography in Odisha in the 1960s on a critical understanding of the institution of the *Mahari* is the second source critical to my investigation of *Mahari* movement. I borrow from her comprehensive reading of the *Mahari* ritual practice. Apffel-Marglin's sets up the foundation of the entire ritual process for me to then focus and further expand on the elements of movement within the ritual. Her study provides the mechanics of the syncretism going on in the *Mahari* ritual practice. She also elicits the significance of each ritual and its respective components. Overall, she describes the institution of the *Maharis* in the *Jagannath* temple by emphasizing on its

relationship to the categories of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness that are transformational as opposed to the rigid categories of purity and impurity. The author notes that traditionally the *Mahari* was believed to be Hindu goddess *Lakshmi* or the wife of *Jagannath*. On the mortal plane, the *Mahari* consummated her marriage with the king who was considered to be the divine incarnation of *Jagannath*. Showing the religious, social, and ritual lives of the *Mahari*, the author argues that the temple-dancer was an embodiment of auspiciousness and induced that quality during her ritual performances. She positions the *Mahari* at the center of the Hindu life-world in Odisha and shows how her rituals were important for ensuring fertility and prosperousness in the kingdom.

The last source informing me on *Mahari* ritual movement practice is my practicing *Odissi* body. My moving *Odissi* body connects me to the ritual practice of the *Mahari* through the twenty-five years of my training of the codified *Odissi* vocabulary as well as my performance of the canonical repertoire. My training in Kelucharan Mohapatra style of *Odissi* consists of developing a strong core that always remains upright and grounded. It divides the torso at the waist ensuring a lyrical torso over stationary hips. Isolating the circular movements of the torso while maintaining a stable pelvic girdle constitutes virtuosity in technique. *Odissi* also trains codified gestural vocabulary that represents and symbolizes real-world associations. It ensures the practice and memorizing of the vast set of neck, eye,

head, chin, lips, feet, and hand gestures that enable verbal communication of story-lines in *Abhinaya* as well as abstract choreography or *Nritta*. *Odissi* choreographers combine the postural and the gestural codifications to choreograph. Kelucharan Mohapatra's choreographies focus on fast footwork, quick isolations of torso, and nuanced gestural communication. Mohapatra's choreographies of the songs from the *Gitagovinda* are highly acclaimed and constitute the *Odissi* canon. So do his pure dance compositions, namely *Batu* and *Pallavi* which call for high degree of skillful technique especially in the earthiness of the feet and the isolations of the torso. His choreography of the *Ardhanarisvara* (half man-half woman) for his ace disciple, the late Sanjukta Panigrahi has also achieved numerous accolades and like his *Gitagovinda* choreographies have been circulating in the international *Odissi* community for the past fifty years. *Nritta*, *Abhinaya*, *Batu*, *Pallavi*, *Gitagovinda*, and *Ardhanarisvara* are all components of *Mahari* ritual in various capacities and in my analysis, I will show how the *Mahari* is latent in the canon.

In the following two sections, I discuss the morning and the evening ritual practice of the *Mahari* respectively. I describe how sexuality is at the core of *Mahari* spiritual practice and her movement can be shown to be subversive complicating the central status of the male deity in *Odissi*.

MORNING RITUAL: SAKHALA DHUPA

The morning ritual, also known as *Sakhala Dhupa*, has two separate dimensions. One involves feeding the deity behind closed doors in the inner sanctum, and the other involves the *Mahari* performance in the *Natamandira* where the devotees observe her ritual performance. The worship ceremony sticks with the *Vaishnavite* means of worship like waving the fly-whisk for cooling *Jagannath* and offering flowers, camphor, and vermillion among a vast array of ritual ingredients. The *Mahari* enters using the curving *Meena-Danda* walk to present a sequence in *Nritta* with percussive accompaniment on drums and she faces south in the direction of the cremation grounds in Puri. This exemplifies the *Tantric* undertones of her dancing because, according to *Sakta Tantra*, the cremation that transgresses the conventional notions of life and death are considered highly auspicious, and they are the experimental laboratory of *Tantric* ritual praxis. This ritual establishes the *Mahari* as the *Calanti Devi* or the walking goddess as the divine consort of *Jagannath*. The syncretic influence between *Vaishnavism* (worshipping Hindu male deity *Visnu*) and *Sakta Tantra* (worshipping Hindu female goddess *Sakti*) forms the subtle undertone of the ritual performance during the *Sakhala Dhupa*.

The morning ritual combines movement and sexuality in a syncretic religious affair through the *Tantric* practice.²⁶ The *Mahari* offering symbolizes the fifth m or *Maithuna* (sexual intercourse) of the *Pancamakara Tantric* ritual: the *Tantric* ritual using five ms, *Mada* (wine), *Mamsa* (meat), *Matsya* (fish), *Mudra* (parched grain), and *Maithuna* (sexual intercourse). As per the *Sakta Tantric* tradition or goddess worship, the *Mahari* performance leads to the production of her vaginal sexual fluids referred to as *Sakti Uchhista* or the leavings of *Sakti* (*Wives of the God King* 197). These leavings are considered extremely auspicious and are considered to embody *Jagannath* himself. *Mahari* sexuality is the principal medium as well as the remainder of the divine. Her sexual potency enables the attainment of the divine both for the *Mahari* as well as for the devotees as they roll over the floor after the dance of the *Mahari* to absorb the *Sakti Uchhista*. The *Mahari* performance, therefore, combines movement and sexuality in the service of worshipping, dancing for, and subsequently, being *Jagannath*.

I connect to *Mahari* ritual practice through my training in *Odissi*. One important movement phrase in the morning ritual is the *Meena-Danda* or the fish-walk gait. I have learned the *Meena-Danda* in my *Odissi* training although my

²⁶ From her ethnographic study in Odisha, Apffel-Marglin, draws connections between the Mahari dance during this day-time meal and Tantric practice. Having no primary access to the practice myself, I borrow from her reading and theorizing of the ritual.

Meena-Danda is bound by the percussive dictates of the drummer. Sarat Kumar Das, son of Pankaj Charan Das belonging to the *Mahari* lineage, demonstrated the *Mahari Meena-Danda* to me in his living room in India (Personal Interview). Seeing the smooth twists in his body, my body had a visceral reaction since I used the movement since I was a child and did not know that it was from the *Mahari* lineage. Also, I found that my movement is far more angular and sharp as compared to the smooth and flowy version of the Das's *Meena-Danda*. Below, I give two accounts of the *Meena-Danda*; the first one belongs to Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra style of *Odissi* and the second one is my Practice as Research deconstruction in the studio of that style.

Dhin Dhi Naka Dhini Ta Karataka Jhena Karataka Jhena

Ta Dhi Naka Dhini Ta Karataka Jhena Karataka Jhena

Facing towards the stage right, my Guru, Sujata Mohapatra enters the proscenium with alternating flexed toes and heels in the stylistic adaptation of *Meena-Danda* by Kelucharan Mohapatra style of *Odissi*.²⁷ Her ribs arc around her spinal column as she moves to the twists and turns of *Meena-Danda*, the fish-walk gait that the *Mahari* used to enter the *Natamandira* or the dancing hall. The above percussive syllables guide the

²⁷ Here, I analyze the entry sequence of the invocatory piece in *Odissi*, also known as, *Mangalacharan* performed by Sujata Mohapatra, a leading proponent of Kelucharan Mohapatra style of *Odissi* (Sujata Mohapatra).

exact placement and timing of her heel-toe motion. Between each consecutive deployment of the heel and the toe, there lies the twist accompanied by *Karataka Jhena Karataka Jhena*. In her *Odissi* body, she controls the twist per the percussive dictates of Srjan, the institution founded by Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. Mohapatra was a percussionist and he deployed the *Meena-Danda* through a rhythmic composition. Yet, the twist remains an interesting anomaly in the rest of the construction of the *Meena-Danda*. While each foot posture bears a name (*Prushta Dhanu*, *Bandhani*, or *Anukunchita*) in the codified vocabulary of *Odissi*, the circular pivoting around my heel juxtaposed with the see-sawing torso has no marked nomenclature. While teaching the entry sequence using the *Meena-Danda*, Ratikant Mohapatra, son of Kelucharan Mohapatra, uses the English transitive verb, ‘twist,’ to specify the spiraling spine of the *Meena-Danda* as he plays the above rhythmic syllables on the *Mardala* or drums.

I graze my big toe around my standing foot tracing my ankle and the sides of my foot onto the floor as I embody the Mahari’s Meena-Danda.²⁸ Eventually, my toe gives way to my heel through the balls of my

²⁸ I explicitly invoke the *Mahari* as I perform the *Meena-Danda* in a PaR deconstruction of the *Odissi* canon.

foot. My knees bend and remain parallel to one another as my I toe-heel my way adding a side-to-side torso movement. The mobile leg crosses the static one pivoting around the heel eventually landing onto the floor. My front leg now bears my weight while the heel of my back foot leaves the ground. My knees move away from one another and my upper body twists on stationary hips. I feel the friction on the other big toe as it repeats the same grazing motion creating invisible winding patterns on the floor.

Here, I describe my execution of the Meena-Danda in the dance studios of The Ohio State University in Columbus, which takes me to the studios in Kolkata as I learnt it on the uneven cement floors of my teacher, Pausali Mukherjee's humble dance class. Meena-Danda holds a special place because it is the first movement sequence I learned out of a canonical choreography from the Odissi repertory. As I walk in the studios here in Columbus in the Meena-Danda, I also connect my practice to that of the Mahari as she performed on the age-old stone floors of the Natamandira (dancing hall) in the Konarak Surya Deul (Sun temple in Konarak). I remember the friction generated between my big toes and the floor of the Natamandira I encountered during my field research in Odisha. The floors in ruins are strewn with stone pebbles that hurt my bare feet as I engage in the heel-toe action. The Mahari once navigated these spaces with her

Meena-Danda. The ruins of the Natamandira prevent my otherwise smooth execution of Odissi movement as on the Marley studio floors reminding me of the historical lack in my dancing body that fails to acknowledge the Mahari. The tremors generated in my body due to the frictional resistance created between my toes and the temple ruins interrupts my convenient movement practice in the dance studio. As I try to recreate the sensation of the act of engaging the Meena-Danda again, here and now, in this studio space, I graze my toes harder along the floor, increase the spatial twists, and search for lost origins, although cognizant of the futility of my search with the death of Sashimani Devi, the last surviving Mahari. Sujata Mohapatra's Odissi tries to overdetermine the Mahari Meena-Danda through rhythmic injunctions but the Mahari twists persist that I further accentuate in my studio decompositions of my Odissi training. In the folds of the twists in the Meena-Danda remains traces of the Mahari's sexual potency that, as I discuss below, is completely neutered in the Odissi repertoire.

In comparing these two movement accounts, first as taught to me by Sujata Mohapatra and then my own practice, I note that *Odissi* technique restricts the fluidity of the *Mahari* movement. It imposes certain technical requirements through its codified vocabulary of the limbs and the torso. It bounds

the *Meena-Danda* to defined angular orientations. Below, I analyze the nature of these specific tendencies within *Odissi* technique and its particular relationship to the *Mahari* body.

The journey from *Mahari* ritual practice to *Odissi* repertory is animated by the imposition of technical injunctions imposed by the latter on the former. *Odissi* repertoire assumes an interesting partnership with the *Mahari* ritual practice since on one hand, *Odissi* claims allegiance to the *Mahari* tradition, while on the other, it distances itself from *Mahari* practice. The morning ritual performance is similar to the *Batu*, *Sthyayee*, and *Pallavi* segments of contemporary *Odissi* concert dance repertory (Banerji, “Odissi Dance” 185). In my execution of *Batu*, I never imagined the sexual implication undergirding this piece. I have trained in and performed multiple variations of these pieces over the past twenty-five years of my life. But, the *Mahari* has never been acknowledged as the creator or even the mediator of these historical relics. The choreography of most of these pieces has been attributed to my Guru, Kelucharan Mohapatra. Although he might have pieced them together in a continuous and repeatable *Items*,²⁹ they clearly have elements of the *Mahari* lineage. For example, in my *Batu*, the second piece in the repertoire denoting the foundational elements of *Odissi* (such as, ornaments,

²⁹ All *Odissi* dancers are familiar with the word, *Item* as it refers to a piece. The more *Items* one knows, the more senior he or she is supposed to be in the training process.

musical instruments etc.), I find the most difficult step when I have one leg extended and the other bent so that the body is close to the floor and rotating a full-circle. I have been taught that this step needs to be performed with utmost ease despite the pain experienced in turning on the floor on my knees. This movement is particularly tied to virtuosic bodily control and perfect executions of poise and rigor. I was pleasantly surprised to know that this same step was directly tied to the *Mahari's* morning ritual performance. While providing initial feedback to my research on this chapter, Apffel-Marglin in a personal correspondence noted that this movement was deployed by the *Mahari* during *Sakhala Dhupa* to “ensure the *Sakti-Ucchista* will be deposited in as large an area as possible.” In current practice, the sexual potency of the *Mahari* is completely sterilized and the movement is decontextualized as virtuosic technical *Odissi* movement.

As I perform these canonical pieces, I approximate *Mahari* dancing alongside imposing the biases incurred against *Mahari* movement in *Odissi* technique. The morning ritual practice of the *Mahari* are primarily based on abstract dancing *Nritta*, that has no literal text associated with the movement. The dance focuses postural and gestural vocabulary without necessarily dealing with narrative, literary, and story-telling materials. In my training of *Nritta*, or the pure dance that the *Mahari* used in the morning ritual, my torso rotates around my

spine while my hips remain stable. My curving upper body contrasts with the heel, toe, stomp, and brush of my footwork as my stationary hips isolate the flowing torso from the speedy footwork of my legs. Uprightness of the posture and speedy footwork transposed with the lyrical torso constitute virtuosic technique in *Odissi*. From my experience of performing the circular rotation on my knees, I can vouch for its difficulty. There is no way that the *Mahari* was not a trained dancer. But clearly the values embedded in her training were different from what I use in my *Odissi* training. When analyzing broad performative characteristics of Sashimani Devi's dancing in *Given to Dance*, I find that *Mahari Nritya* treats the body as a whole in contrast to *Odissi's* division of the body into the upper and the lower halves. Her whole-bodied gesturing enabled by the curving of her spinal column flows seamlessly from her chest to her knees. The spinal cord bends as the hands make a rounded shape in front of the body contrasting the upright spinal column of *Odissi* movement. Her footwork is sparse and does not articulate all the percussive elements being played on the drums by the drummer. Yet, according to the standards set by *Odissi*, the *Mahari* falls short of technique. In my experience, it is quite common among *Odissi* dancers to consider *Mahari* dance as 'non-technical' and lacking sophistication. *Odissi* Gurus often discount *Mahari* dancing for the 'lack' of refinement of classical aesthetics. Thus, while the *Mahari* repertory partially intersects with that of

Odissi, the latter considers itself superior on the benchmark of technique while assuming the flawless transfer of the devotional mysticism from the *Mahari* ritual to *Odissi* dance practice.

Further injunctions include the training regimens in *Odissi* technique that practice stringent isolations of the torso from hip movements. Choreographic analysis of Sashimani Devi's dancing in *Given to Dance* reveals that the *Mahari* deployed her entire body in a single sweeping gesture without isolating her torso from the hips as performed by her *Odissi* counterpart. From my continued training under Ratikant and Sujata Mohapatra in Kelucharan Mohapatra style of *Odissi*, I know that *Odissi* demarcates the body into an upper and a lower body by stabilizing the side-to-side, front-and-back, and circular movement of the hips. This division encourages isolations of the torso over stationary hips, which Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra style of *Odissi* evaluates as the pinnacle of virtuosity in bodily control. Instead of the rounded edges of the *Mahari* hip movement, *Odissi*, as seen in the Srjan ensemble, emanates the angular deflections of torso portraying virtuosic control over isolations of different body parts. When I teach *Odissi* foundations, I hold students' hips firmly while asking them to move their torsos. Hence, I perpetrate this technical injunction onto my students as well. By reflecting on this isolation in my Practice as Research deconstructions of my *Odissi* movement, I reconstruct this isolation as an imposition to distance the

sexual potency of the *Mahari* from the *Odissi* body. By controlling the pelvis area, the sexually transgressive potential of the *Tantric* associations of the *Mahari* can be minimized to a point of elimination. The sexual potency of the *Mahari* animates technical injunctions within *Odissi*. In the name of technique, *Odissi* continually polices *Mahari* sexuality. Under the guise of instituting greater control over one's body via hip-torso isolations, *Odissi* prevents the *Mahari* from surfacing. Despite the technical policing, the *Mahari* persists within the quintessential twists of the *Odissi* dancing body.³⁰

The *Mahari* dance in the morning ritual is called *Uchhista Nritya*, in which *Uchhista* means “left-over.” While Apffel-Marglin notes the sexual potency of the vaginal left-over of the *Mahari* during *Uchhista Nritya*, I locate her sexualized performativity in the twists of my dancing body. My twist becomes performative of the *Mahari* as well as her performative left-over. This way, as I have articulated previously, the twist punctuates the codified vocabulary of the *Odissi* dancing body as the embodied left-over of the *Mahari*. My torso twists connect the sequential execution of the *Meena-Danda* by my right and left leg. The twist is the inertial response to the organizing of weight in the moving body. The twist erupts after the foot positions, hand gestures, and facial focus have been

³⁰ In “*Mahari* Then and Now: Queering Performativity in *Odissi*,” I have argued that the hip-torso isolation is a distinct characteristic of Kelucharan Mohapatra style of *Odissi* that enforces a diminished value of *Mahari* ritual praxis.

determined. As I mentioned before, the twist remains a gap in the codified vocabulary in *Odissi*. *Odissi* Gurus fill in this gap by using the English word itself or simply by allowing the students to imitate their demonstrations of their spiraling spinal columns. I argue that the *Odissi* twist invokes the *Mahari* each time it is executed as she lies latent within the folds of the twist. In this way, the twist is the left-over of the *Mahari Meena-Danda* that remains in the contemporary *Odissi* dancing body to contest her obsolescence. In addition, the twisting *Meena-Danda* connects to the sexual performativity of the *Mahari* in her ritualized persona.

Invoking the twist as the site of the *Mahari* presents a sexually transgressive modality that can potentially complicate the conservative horizon of *Odissi*.³¹ Drawing on the work of seminal queer theorist, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, I believe that the twisting aesthetic of the *Meena-Danda* is queer, as in from its Latin counterpart *torquere* meaning to twist. Etymologically connecting to Sedgwick's queer, the twist of my practice bears historical and performative remnants of the non-normative sexuality of the *Mahari* outside of social marriage and represents the transgressive sexual potency of the *Mahari* in ritual. Here, queer becomes her unconventional sexuality not engaged in the procreative heteronormativity of monogamous social marriage. The *Meena-Danda* poses a

³¹ The conventional *Odissi* dancing body represents the divine mysticism of the *Mahari* ritual performance.

queer aesthetic enabling the complex negotiation of embodied twists and non-normative representations of sexuality. By recognizing the *Meena-Danda* as the central organizing principle within the *Odissi* dancing body, I believe in the efficacy of the queer framework for theorizing the sexual transgression in *Odissi* movement via invoking *Mahari* sexuality. *Meena-Danda* queers the scope of *Odissi* dance by surfacing the *Mahari* in her undomesticated sexuality. Thus, the *Mahari* persists in *Odissi* through her embodied gestures that opens alternatives to the conservative constitution of sexuality in *Odissi*.

I conclude my discussion of the morning ritual by postulating that policing is never complete in *Odissi* since the *Mahari* remains a latent sexually transgressive force within the *Odissi* body that leads to its spiritual transgression. By connecting my embodied practice to that of the *Mahari*, I invoke her in her sexually transgressive avatar. In a rhythmic movement sequence recorded in *Given to Dance*, Sashimani Devi performs the oft-repeated *Odissi* step called *Chhapaka* in which she stamps the ground with one foot propelling herself to another direction. Since the morning ritual dance consisted of *Nritta* or pure dancing, it is safe to assume that Devi performs the same in the originary site of the ritual practice, or the *Natamandira*. In her rendition of the *Chhapaka*, there is a distinct change of levels and a sense of urgency. From my training of the *Chhapaka* in *Odissi*, I restrict the movement in two ways. I reduce the variation of

levels and the movement is a lot subtler in my practice than that of Sashimani Mahari. Despite the differences, both our *Chhapakas* require us to stretch our stomping foot such that the other leg stretches as the body elongates in a spiral. The stretched leg changes directions of the body as it lands at a distance displacing the current position of the body. Once the stretch is achieved to the maximum with no additional elongation possible between the upper torso and the lower pelvis, the other leg touches the ground at a distance in the desired direction to complete the *Chhapaka*. This steering motion by a stretched foot accentuates opposing motions in the hips and the torso creating the initial stretching effect such as that of a slingshot; the body elongates in a spiral.

My execution of the *Chhapaka* is bound by the technical injunctions of *Odissi* restricting the serpentine core of the *Mahari* that allows a call and response relationship between the hips and the torso and substituting with the rigid core of *Odissi*. By loosening my hip-torso isolations, through *Chhapaka*, I access the kinesthetic embodiment of the *Mahari*. Through this maneuver, I access her non-procreative transgressive sexual potency. Alongside the sexual dimension, this step defines the spiritual dimension in movement within the sexual core. *Tantric* studies expert, Hugh Urban argues that female sexuality mobilizes the phenomena of transgression in *Tantric* ritual that “functions like a kind of spiritual slingshot, which is first stretched as tightly as possible and then suddenly released in order

to propel the adept into ecstatic liberation” (76). I am connecting my embodied practice of the *Chhapaka* to the *Mahari*’s artistic as well as devotional practice. Given the absolute devotion of the *Mahari* through her performative practice, I argue, that the *Mahari Chhapaka* sling-shot her bodily orientation literally as well as figuratively giving her access to the mundane and the spiritual realms within her performative acts. *Odissi*-scholar Ananya Chatterjea enlists the characteristics of *Mahari* movement as sensuous “torso movements, displaced hip line, and rounded curvilinearity, the full articulation of female sexuality, and the belief in the utter unison of bodily and spiritual desire” (149).³² Through my embodied experience of the *Chhapaka*, I find *Mahari* ritual performativity committing to a spiral transgression featuring momentary stasis and disequilibrium and navigating between religious and performative spaces. The *Mahari* embodied practice inspires a full-bodied aesthetic within my *Odissi* practice that keeps her alive through her sexually and spiritually transgressive motility. Unlike my conventional *Odissi* practice that neuters the sexuality of the *Mahari* to access the spiritual dimension, this invoking, becomes a subversive modality in my sexually conservative *Odissi* body.

³² In the “Introduction,” I have shown how the *Mahari* is reified as a devotional figure in *Odissi*. In fact, *Odissi* derives its devotional cache from the *Mahari* ritual worshipping practice. However, this conservative maneuver enables *Odissi* to appropriate the *Mahari* tradition while deriving its historical, ritual, and mystical foundation from it.

EVENING RITUAL: PAHUDA ALATI

The *Mahari* sings to the songs from Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda* during the nocturnal ritual called *Pahuda Alati*, the putting to sleep ceremony, during which the gods in the *Jagannath* temple retire for the day. In the inner sanctum of the temple, *Jagannath* resides with his sister *Subhadra* and his brother *Balaram*. As for the midday nap, three beds are placed in front of the images of *Jagannath*, *Subhadra*, and *Balaram*. The male priests place a small metal image of the *Ardhanarisvara* (half man half woman depicting the fusion of *Siva* and his wife *Parvati*) on one of the three beds and later bring it to the gate separating the *Garba Griha* or the inner sanctum and *Natamandira* or the dance hall. The *Brahmin* priests place the image of the *Ardhanarisvara* on a stand at the threshold. The stand is shaped as a *Damru* or the two-headed drum of *Siva*. The priests offer flowers and wave lamps at the *Ardhanarisvara* image as a mark of respect. They bring the image back to the beds before stowing it away for the night. The *Mahari* sings the *Gitagovinda* throughout the ceremony and does not cross the threshold of the inner sanctum. She stays until late along with the male priests till the very end of the *Pahuda*

Alati. After the end of the ceremony, a priest called *Talichu Mohapatra* mud-seals the doors for the gods to rest for the night.³³

Vaishnavism has been a dominating influence in the *Jagannath* cult, *Mahari* ritual practice, and in *Odissi* today. The dominating influence of *Vaishnavism* since the sixteenth century eclipsed the *Sakta Tantra* viewpoint while initiating greater control on the body of the temple-dancer. Unlike the other religious influences in Odisha, such as that of Saivism (worshipping Hindu male deity Siva), Jainism, and Vajrayana Buddhism that were far more tolerant of difference in religious beliefs, Vaishnavism imposed its ideological principles on fringe beliefs (Misra 58). Under this fold, the *Jagannath* cult started to identify with the *Vaishnavite* beliefs and *Jagannath* became one with *Visnu*. A stone inscription on the walls of the *Jagannath* temple bears the legal proclamation by King Prataparudradeva in the 1500 C.E. restricting the *Mahari* repertoire strictly to the *Gitagovinda* (Mishra 54). Scholar Reena Ghadei notes that throughout her services *Mahari* Kokila Prabha “was instructed to dance and recite *Gita Govinda*” (25). *Given to Dance* records *Mahari* Kokila Prabha’s singing of the *Gitagovinda* as an expressive outpouring of her soul at the altar of the divine, where the divine is co-created in her ritual act. While describing architectural changes in Odishan

³³ I gather this description of the nocturnal ritual from Apffel-Marglin’s descriptions in *Wives of the God King* (232).

Hindu temples, art historian Thomas Eugene Donaldson suggests that initially the *Natamandira* (the dancing hall) was built at a distance from the *Jagamohana* (the prayer hall adjacent to the *Garba-Griha* or the inner sanctum). The performance of the *Mahari* happened in the *Natamandira* for the devotees, an event that showed the socio-religious nature of temple-activities, as the *Mahari* performance was often for a public and not solely for the gods. However, Donaldson claims that with the rising influence of *Jagannath* as the all-powerful god in Odisha, a smaller four-walled structure was squeezed in between the *Natamandira* and the *Jagamohana* for *Mahari* dancing. The present *Natamandira* was then converted into *Bhogamandapa* (the dining hall). Donaldson argues that with the increasing power of *Jagannath* in Odisha, the *Natamandira* came closer to the deity. The *Mahari* performance increasingly became restricted for the deity and not for the general audience. Along with this development, the king also acquired deity-like status. I believe that the relevance of the temple-dancing became more and more associated with the king-deity nexus and the importance of the *Mahari* as a dancer succumbed to her status as the wife of *Jagannath*. With this development, grew the power of the iconic *Jagannath* and his earthly incarnations in the form of the royalty and the clergy. Under the influence of Vaishnavism “dancing of women was disfavored and *Gotipua* dancing was encouraged” (Chatterjea, “Contestations,” 148). This view is contested since Banerji argues that changing

socio-political factors resulted in this changing paradigm in the performance scenario that was not really determined by misogyny (“Odissi Dance” 345). In any case, in the proscenium theatre today, *Odissi* considers spiritual supplication to *Jagannath* as the ultimate goal for each and every dancer who is required to be a devotee personifying the complete surrender of the *Mahari*. Although, she is the wife of *Jagannath*, the relationship is marked with inequality at the outset.

Nevertheless, the embodied practice of the *Mahari* contests these embedded hierarchies. A deeper investigation of the *Mahari* performance during the *Pahuda Alati* challenges the dominating influence of *Vaishnavism* in the *Jagannath* cult. Connecting the *Vaishnavite* injunctions to her *Sakta Tantric* characteristics via her movement practice, the *Mahari* challenges the ascribed gendered hierarchy. At the outset, singing and gesturing to the lyrics of the *Gitagovinda*, *Odissi Abhinaya* or expressional repertoire portrays the epitome of divine supplication to *Jagannath* as *Visnu*. But then again, a deeper investigation into the *Mahari* performance questions the nature of this worshipping program. During *Pahuda Alati*, *Jagannath* is conceived of as *Bhairava*, *Siva* in his destructive self, and the *Mahari* as his consort *Bhairavi*. The performance by the *Mahari* represents the sexual intercourse between *Bhairava* and *Bhairavi*. This is the *Sakta Tantric* view that occupies an important role in the syncretism of *Sakta Tantra* and *Vaishnavism* in the *Jagannath* cult. The *Ardhanarisvara* represents the

confluence of masculine and feminine energies through the sexual union between the male and the female Hindu deities. According to the Hindu cosmology, this sexual union gives rise to all creation. Representing this sexual union, the *Mahari* dance then is at the core of the divine creation. Her embodiment of movement becomes the principal locus of the origination of the entire cosmos. Her dancing animates the existence of the universe and is essential to the functioning of the life-world. Yet, creation has multiple valences here. *Mahari* creation implies non-procreative sexual intimacy between herself and *Jagannath* to continue transmitting the ritual knowledge. Through her movement, the *Mahari* makes a decisive difference between creation and procreation. Banerji argues that the *Mahari* dancing nurtures creative faculties necessary for reproducing a body of ritual knowledge (“Dance and the Distributed Body” 41). The procreative impulse of the *Ardhnariswara* converses in movement with the erotic tenor of the *Gitagovinda*. The sexual union of *Bhairava* and *Bhairavi* animating the world into its existence meets the erotic union of *Krishna* and *Radha* in the *Gitagovinda*. In the *Mahari* motion, the procreative and the erotic intertwine to combine the *Vaishnavite* and the *Sakta Tantric* views. The continual reproductive creation in the *Ardhanarisvara* is hindered by the erotic compulsion of the *Gitagovinda*. The erotic tenor of the *Gitagovinda* are woven together with the procreative desire of the *Ardhanarisvara*. Through the continual cyclical braiding in ritual dancing, the

Mahari creates and recreates this syncretic love affair in her performance during *Pahuda Alati* to continually question the dominance of the *Vaishnavite* program over the *Sakta Tantric* view. As a corollary, she complicates the unquestioned hierarchy enjoyed by *Jagannath*.

Establishing embodied connections between my *Odissi* practice and *Mahari* dancing in *Pahuda Alati*, I emanate the performative efficacy of *Mahari* ritual. The *Mahari* does not stay satisfied with her role as secondary to *Jagannath* as ascribed by *Vaishnavism*. In my *Odissi* practice, I access the elements of the *Pahuda Alati* as choreographed pieces in the canonical repertoire. Choreography on the songs from the *Gitagovinda* by Kelucharan Mohapatra have been hailed as masterpieces by the *Odissi* aficionados. Also, his composition on the *Ardhanarisvara* based on Adi Shankaracharya's lyrics and describing the subtle shifts between the male god and the female goddess has been widely acclaimed. Both the *Gitagovinda* and the *Ardhanarisvara* are mature pieces that are taught to dancers with a considerable amount of training in *Odissi*. Having performed to *Gitagovinda* and the *Ardhanarisvara*, I find myself drawn to the *Mahari* ritual experience. Although her experience with the *Gitagovinda* and the *Ardhanarisvara* is different from my access to her ritual elements in concert choreography, I ask: can my concert performance throw light on *Mahari* ritual practice? Drawing from my movement experience, in the following paragraphs, I

comment on her ritual practice. To do so, I give an account of the *Odissi* body performing to the *Gitagovinda* followed by my Practice as Research deconstruction of the *Odissi* body in my studio practice.

Sitting majestically on the floor by elongating his spinal column from the sit bones, surreptitiously twisting his feet from the hip joints, and languorously extending his arms over his head, *Odissi* maestro, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, portrays an erotic conversation between *Radha* and *Krishna* using his sensuous gaze orienting the audience towards both the addressee and the addressed. Softening his gaze, *Radha* requests *Krishna* to sooth her by applying sandalwood paste onto her breasts; gently reaching with his hands, *Krishna* fondles with *Radha*'s breasts. Gesticulating the springtime blossoms, flowers, creepers, bow and arrow of *Kama* (Hindu god of love), Mohapatra's *Abhinaya* (expressional movement) evokes an erotic flavor stylizing it within the curvilinear neck flicks, spiraling torso twists, and briskly shifting focus within the codified vocabulary in *Odissi*.³⁴

³⁴ The movement descriptions illustrate Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra's performance of his choreography of the *Gitagovinda* in *Odissi* (*Jaydeva's Geeta Govinda*). Dance scholar Uttara Asha Coorlawala while describing Mohapatra's performance recognized the sensuous and sensual imagery in stylized codes. She claims that this performance is does not resort to "an "in your face" kind of performance of sexuality to X-rated pornography. Yet it comes so close." ("Darshan and Abhinaya" 64).

Sitting on the floor with my legs crossed, I recreate Mohapatra's Odissi body through my reimagining of the Mahari. My spinal column curves at the base of my neck, my elbows remain close to my body, and I hold the Banshi or the flute with both my hands. A slight contraction of my upper body differentiates between Mohapatra's majestic and performative Krishna and my reconstituted Mahari's humble Krishna. While Mohapatra enacts Krishna, the Mahari's minimal gesticulation and non-presentational aesthetic remains at ease with herself as embodying Krishna. In a split-second transition, I cover my face with the edge of my Sari to portray the aesthetic depiction of shyness; Radha is shy of Krishna's romantic encounters. Again, as the Mahari, I am Radha and not portraying Radha. As noted in Sashimani Devi's gesticulations of Radha, I deflect my neck forward in this process (Given to Dance). This forward deflection is not considered optimal for the 'refined' heroine in Odissi. Rather the frontal neck deflection in Odissi shows the movement of the peacock whose motion is considered animalistic and less refined than that of the classical heroine such as Radha. Through this frontal deflection, I question the foundational assumptions of refinement in Odissi that differentiates between the 'crude' Mahari and 'sophisticated' Odissi in the first place. I combine my creative faculties to embody the erotic union of

Krishna and Radha without representing them. There is no audience for Mahari performance as her ritual movement practice reconfigures the locus of the spiritual center within Odissi resting it in her movement. The inanimate deities require her movement to come alive and enable the continual process of creation through the sexual union between the Hindu god and the goddess. The movement combines religious and performative efficacy while transgressing the male spiritual core of Odissi originally found in Jagannath.

In comparing these two movement accounts, first by Kelucharan Mohapatra and then by myself, I notice the difference to approaching *Abhinaya*. The former is guided by the technical dictates of *Odissi* that measures virtuosity in quick transitions between characters and a plethora of codified gesticulation. The latter permeated with the *Mahari* embodiment relishes in each gesture to personify the character addressed to. The exuberant being in each moment questions the representational impulse of *Odissi Abhinaya* by imbibing a conversational approach to expressivity through movement.

Mahari movement practice at the syncretic intersection of erotic and reproductive acts further confounds the boundaries of being and enacting. As seen in *Given to Dance* in Sashimani Devi's dancing, *Mahari* gesturing is sparse. She

uses *Mudras* or hand gestures only to describe the main characters in the song unlike her *Odissi* counterpart who describes the textual and contextual connections of the lyrics of the *Gitagovinda* using hypercodified gesticulation. The *Mahari* minimally gestures to address the central people addressed in the lyrics. Not only does *Mahari*'s gesturing highlight the non-linguistic nature of her movement, it also complicates boundaries between being and representing. Through her minimal gesturing, the *Mahari* establishes herself as the equal counterpart of *Jagannath*. Her unabashed and direct address to *Jagannath* takes away the distance between the human and the divine. From the very outset, the *Mahari* places herself on the same plane as that of *Jagannath*. When asked about *Jagannath*, Sashimani Devi claims proudly "he is my husband and I am his wife. There is no doubt about it" (Barry). The *Mahari* performance is a personal conversation between the devotee and the devoted or the mortal and the divine or the male deity and the female goddess. In addition to placing her on an equal plane with her divine husband, the *Mahari* also embodies the divine.

Given the presence of the *Ardhanarisvara* at the threshold of the *Natamandira* and the *Garba-Griha*, the *Mahari* movement negotiates between being the divine and enacting the divine. On one hand, she embodies the divine within herself as positioning herself as *Jagannath*'s consort. On the other hand, in movement she embodies both the male and the female gods. In one instance, she

holds the flute portraying the male god and in another instant, she draws the edge of her *Sari* over her head to hide her face—hence, representing the female goddess expressing love for her male counterpart. The *Mahari* embodies both the male and the female in her gesturing as being, which is quite different from the gesticulation deployed in *Odissi* where gestures enact situations or characters. I perform in the third person context in my *Odissi* repertoire and continually return to being the third person narrator assuming an impersonal audience. I represent the deities, the contexts, the environments, and the rhythm. Hence, I argue that gesturing by the *Mahari* opens spaces of redefining the spiritual core in *Odissi* as it places the *Mahari* at the same planar level as *Jagannath*. As a corollary, the process of *Mahari* gesturing as being becomes the locus of the spirituality. The divine does not reside in the *Jagannath* or in the *Mahari* anymore. Rather, it is in the movement that animates both *Jagannath* and the *Mahari* into existence. By this maneuver, the *Mahari* nudges the male center of the *Odissi* dancing body. She contests the religious assumptions through her performative practice.

In the following paragraphs, I initiate a conversation between poststructuralist theory and South Asian philosophy to further explore the spiritual core of the *Mahari* that questions the male center of *Odissi*. Throughout my analysis, I have imbricated theoretical deconstruction with studio deconstructions

of movement. By throwing light on these imbrications, I argue that deconstruction aids the process of uncovering *Mahari* spirituality.

Poststructuralist Jacques Derrida coined the term deconstruction to criticize the intended structural unity of texts postulating that meaning can never be fully known disallowing the process of literal language to fix meaning. Critiquing the metaphysical principles of Platonism that separates essence from appearance while valuing the former over the latter, Derrida topples the hierarchy by re-inscribing the marginalized at the center where the center itself is a measure of its differences. Deconstruction is a process of thinking that is endless and exposes the radical difference between the signifier and the signified. Literary theorist Kurt Heidinger critiques Derrida's maneuver as nihilistic, proposing that the tenth century Indian philosopher, Abhinavagupta anticipates Derrida's maneuver while positing a solution that human beings are the transcendental signified: the logocentric presence that Derrida deems as absent (Heidinger 132). By analyzing *Pahuda Alati*, I take on Heidinger's discussion on Derrida and Abhinavagupta through the *Mahari* practice. I propose that the transcendental signified is in constant regeneration and dependent on the *Mahari* movement for its realization in the first place. Through this maneuver, the performative movements of *Mahari* rituals remain latent in my *Odissi* dancing body obviating the spiritual liberation in *Odissi*.

How does *Mahari* gesturing transgress the conventional definitions of spirituality in the *Odissi* body? Heidinger suggests that Derridean deconstruction reenacts the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic fall from the immaterial logos to the phenomenal reality reinforced by the monotheistic construct of a distant god who once uttered the word that animated the universe into existence. Heidinger critiques Derrida's apocalyptic 'fall' by borrowing from Abhinavagupta's treatises on Tantra viewing the human body as the microcosm of the continual transcendent union between *Siva* and his consort *Sakti*. Through Abhinavagupta, Heidinger shows that "consciousness is not merely logocentric as Derrida would have it but arises from and is dependent upon an interpenetrating network of somatic activity" (134). Unlike the absence of the transcendental-signified in Derrida's accounts, Abhinavagupta locates the transcendence in the self. In Tantric terms, it is the union of sexual intercourse of the male god and the female goddess that bridges the distance "of question and answer, of word-thought and interpreter thought, of sensible and intelligible" (140). This notion of the transcendental signified has been investigated in South Asian sculpture by art historian Vidya Dehejia. She attributes the enlightenment within *Sakti*, the eternal feminine principle of power flowing through the material as well as the spiritual world. As the embodiment of the ritual *Tantric* sexual union as well as being the epitome of *Sakti* or the eternal feminine principle of power animating the cosmos,

the *Mahari* performance is a potent practice involving somatic presence as well as performance.³⁵ The *Mahari* performance combine aesthetic and religious influences in which her experiential encounters with the performance provided a kinesthetic dimension to exploring symbolic significance of *Tantric* ritual.³⁶ Praising *Jagannath* directly through *Abhinaya* or expressional movement and creating an ecstatic environment for the audience while the *Pujakas* fed the Hindu deities, the *Maharis* navigated both religious and aesthetic terrains. However, scholarship on Indian classical dance pays absolutely no attention to her artistic legacy which combines the complex intersections of devotion and art.³⁷ During the *Pahuda Alati*, she performed to the poetic verses of the *Gitagovinda* that artistically embodied her sexual union with the divine. Her movement embodied the erotic union of *Jagannath* and his consort as she symbolized the confluence in her movement. Accessing the historical practice of the *Mahari* only through a

³⁵ According to the temple-priests, she participated as a sexual consort in the esoteric *Kula Tantric* ritual that as noted by Apffel-Marglin required the *Mahari* to perform ritual sexual intercourse with the *Pujaka*, the temple priest. While describing the left-handed *Tantric* *Pancamakara* ritual, Odissi dance-scholar Monica Singh Sangwan describes how the *Pujaka* works “with a non-menstruating *Mahari* seated naked, her yoni exposed and the ensuing coitus to obtain the seminal feminine fluid” to complete the fifth M or *Maithuna* meaning coitus. Hence, the *Mahari* performance conceptually and experientially embodied the sexual union between the divine and the mundane.

³⁶ Religious studies scholars Edward C. Dimock and David Haberman presents similar analyses regarding *Tantric* ritual transgression that combine religious and aesthetic practices to acknowledge the embodied dimension of spiritual attainment. My analysis varies since I locate this spiritual locus not within the body but within the movement of the *Mahari*.

³⁷ Ratna Roy cursorily characterizes *Mahari* movement as an ‘outpouring of a soul.’ Although Odissi emulates her devotional aura and *Odissi* dancers place wooden idols of *Jagannath* on stage to convert the concert space to the sacred temple backdrop, the *Odissi* history fails to engage with the complexity behind her experiential juxtapositions of ritual, artistic, sexual, aesthetic, and religious significance.

thorough deconstruction of my embodied performativity, I disagree with Heidinger. For my analysis, deconstruction does not hinder transcendence. In fact, deconstruction lends itself to transcendence. In summary, my PaR deconstructions of my embodied *Odissi* training enable access to the *Mahari* to conclude that through her gesturing, the *Mahari* redefines the spiritual core within *Odissi* by nudging the patriarchal center embedded in *Jagannath*.³⁸

CONCLUSION

Mahari practice introduces the potential of a female centered practice in *Odissi* dance by broadening the impact of performative ritual practice on the textual dimensions of religious thought, philosophy, and aesthetics. *Mahari* practice redefines the spiritual center in *Odissi* by reconfiguring the role of movement in *Tantra*. Her practice introduces change in the conceptualization as well as actualization of the *Tantric* rituals. It changes the interpretative scope of the ritual itself. I have shown that *Mahari* transgression occurs in the contesting of the gendered hierarchy of the male over the female in *Odissi*. Through this maneuver, she introduces her body as a subversive possibility in the context of Indian religious understanding of *Odissi*. *Odissi* dance revolves around *Jagannath*

³⁸ The given weblink connects to my performative gestures created through a sustained Practice-as-Research investigation of *Mahari* ritual via imbrications of South Asian aesthetic and religious principle alongside poststructuralist theories of deconstruction.

and premised on the unquestioned assumption of the *Mahari* as his divine consort. This interpretation relegates the *Mahari* to a secondary status to the divine male deity. In this chapter, I have shown that through her ritual performance, the *Mahari* reconceives her practice as the principal dimension of the temple ritual program. Hence, *Mahari* performance embodies the divine union through the constant interplay of the hierarchy between the male god and the female goddess in a syncretic affair. Her practice reorients the patriarchal foci of *Odissi* dance. Avanthi Meduri claims that the temple-dancer in the early twentieth century could not envision her feminist potential and internalized the Victorian and upper-caste patriarchal Hindu notions of respectability by proclaiming herself as a celibate wife of Hindu male deities. However, I suggest that the *Mahari* practice challenges Meduri's conclusions about the religious dimension of her ritual practice. Meduri does not conceive of the *Mahari* ritual practice as bearing any potential of transformation, change, power, and transgression. According to the dance studies scholars, the religious dimension forces patriarchal and male chauvinistic practice. Her conclusion stems from a liberal humanist understanding of the sacred and secular dimensions of life as dichotomous.³⁹ The secular realm

³⁹ I want to preface the *Mahari's* playing the respectable, celibate, and virginal wife to gain acceptance in the modern Indian nation state was grossly unsuccessful. In *Tendencies*, Sedgwick claims that liberal narratives engage nationalism and sexuality in "circumscriptive ways" since liberalism internalizes a fear of deviant sexuality that falls outside of monogamous heteronormativity. Hence, the *Mahari's* playing the card of chastity did not cut it since she was always already outside the realm of a liberal understanding of nationalism (147).

is where change can occur while the sacred and the religious forecloses any possibility of transgressive practice. The *Mahari*'s ownership and understanding of her practice in the ritual context broadens the scope of *Odissi* by introducing concepts of subversion from within the religious dimension.

What does *Mahari* ritual practice imply for dance studies? The *Mahari* expands the scope and understanding of movement in the context of dance studies. Existing studies on ritual practice by dance studies scholars, such as Deidre Sklar's work on the Virgin of Guadalupe in New Mexico, have incorporated insider voices and interpretations in the context of movement. What I find missing is the consideration of the artistic and aesthetic work that happens in these cultural contexts. The *Mahari* is conscious of her ritual act as art in the context of devotional performance. This investigation recognizes the artistic, aesthetic, along with the religious aspect of ritual dance. The dichotomy between religious dancing and artistic movement practice is a western construct that Indian classical dance subverts broadly. However, the classical Indian movement internalizes the Victorian notions of sexual propriety for an international visibility.⁴⁰ So, it partially appropriates the *Mahari* body to legitimize its historical relevance over two millennia while separating itself from the sexual

⁴⁰ This is what Ananya Chatterjea calls 'micropolitics of technique' ("Of Corporeal Rewritings").

politics surrounding her. In this chapter, I counter that partial nature of the appropriation by exploring the full potential of *Mahari* ritual performativity. I conclude that the *Mahari* opens up the transgressive dimensions of her religious practice that can reorient the patriarchal horizon of Indian classical dance.

What is the transgressive sum-total of the *Mahari* praxis? I have shown above that *Mahari* dancing transgresses conventions of sexuality and spirituality within *Odissi*. In addition, the *Mahari* practice, I suggest, complicates definitions of movement and religion in dance studies and religious studies respectively. While discussing the role of women in *Pancamakara* ritual, religious studies scholar Madhu Khanna postulates the dual goal of renunciation and enjoyment in *Tantra*, in which female ritual specialists “use the senses and the body as an instrument of liberation” (119). Using my senses and my body as a means to access that of the *Mahari*, I show how a historically marginalized practice challenges patriarchal norms embedded within contemporary practice. I complicate the notions of presence and absence by imbuing historical presence within contemporary absence and locating transcendence in the present via the absent. The spiritual transcendence of the *Mahari* defines transcendence in movement—attaining the divine in the continual being with the divine through gesturing. The sexual potency of the *Mahari* animates her spiritual dimension that sexually transgresses the puritanical norms within contemporary *Odissi*. Her

minimal gesturing expands the role of dance while her movement practice expands the role of religious practice in redefining textual religious dictates. In the minimal gesticulation of the *Mahari* as simultaneously being divine and human, I find what Roy refers to as ‘outpouring’ via a journey through deconstructive transcendence.

Through this embodied work of continually surfacing the *Mahari* for her transgressive potentiality, I gesture towards reconfiguring the role of women in *Tantric* rituals, in which the *Mahari* practice holds a promise towards opening up the conventional definition of *Tantra* itself.⁴¹ By connecting contemporary movement practice with historical ritual practice, I surface the potential of movement in religious ritual. I make a case for ritual dance as an important scholarly investigation in the field of dance studies. Kelucharan Mohapatra’s evocative *Abhinaya* using his gestures is as much high art as it is the *Mahari* ritual in *Pahuda Alati*, in which she sings and gesticulates simultaneously. However, I do not claim that the *Mahari*’s historical behavior supports this sort of opening up of *Tantric* conventions. On the contrary, we have evidence of the *Tantric* priests in the form of present-day *Rajgurus* continuing their practice as beacons of millennia long Hindu tradition while the consorts of *Jagannath* have been

⁴¹ An initiated practitioner of Tantric Buddhism, Miranda Shaw in *Passionate Enlightenment* argues that women played a foundational role during the inception of the tradition.

stripped off their religious and aesthetic functions. Further, the *Maharis* have been disenfranchised of what Banerji claims to be “cultural knowledge” while middle class men and women like myself act as self-appointed cultural ambassadors representing the *Mahari*’s ancient artistry. I borrow from Judith Butler’s problematizing the idea of a subject as a sovereign agent as I propose that the *Mahari*’s egalitarian vision of her ritual practice does not necessarily imply her historical agency (*Excitable Speech* 80). Even if I deny or downplay my *Odissi* body’s inevitable misrepresentation of the *Mahari* body, a project of recovering the voice of the *Mahari* is doomed to be skewed with representation and overdetermination. Given the scarce agential body of the *Mahari* as evidence, my arguments based on *Mahari* ritual interpretations orchestrated by my embodied connections and excavations of the *Mahari* hope to stand as what Biernacki says in case of seventeenth-century Northeast India, “a refractory lens” (“*Yogini* in South Asia” 191). I glean a faint ray of hope from the *Mahari* enterprise of intersecting matrices of movement, aesthetics, religion, and ritual. Although I agree with Banerji that the *Mahari* tradition relegates to the recesses of history as the practice has been discontinued since the 1950s, I see the potential transgression in surfacing the *Mahari* in *Odissi*, a maneuver I engage with for the remaining chapters of my dissertation, first in choreography and then in digital mediation.

Chapter 3: *Mahari* in Choreography⁴²

This chapter is the written supplement for my PaR component in choreography for the proscenium theater. I made a dance piece that was performed by the undergraduate students of Kenyon College.

Name: *Alasa-Kanya: Sculpture in Odissi* (2016)

Date of Performance: December 8, 9, and 10 2016

Venue: Hill Theater, Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio

Length: 12 minutes

Description: I choreographed this piece with my cast for the Fall Dance Concert at Kenyon College.

Durable Document: It is documented in u.osu.edu/Mahari.

⁴² In this chapter, I use the term choreography to denote choreography specifically within *Odissi*. I want to surface the unacknowledged *Mahari* in her subversive capacity as a way to expand the conservative horizon of choreography in *Odissi*. Instead of disregarding the technicities in *Odissi*, I want to include my choreographic experiments within *Odissi*. Dance-scholar Priya Srinivasan in her piece called *Sweating Saris* urges the performers and the audience not to forget the contributions of the *Mahari* by interrupting the classical *Margam*. In the panel discussion after the recent performance of *Sweating Saris* in Columbus, Srinivasan claims that she does not perform in the classical *Margam* anymore. In my work, I align my politics with Srinivasan while surfacing the laboring body of the temple-dancer. But, at the same time, I want to expand the classical *Margam* itself. My work does not discard *Odissi* technique in its totality. Instead it pushes the boundaries of the codified vocabulary of *Odissi* through the gesturing, posturing, and dancing *Mahari* body.



Fig. 2. Reconstructing Stone Sculpture to Stage Choreography. Picture By Matt Hazard.

Practice as Research (PaR) blurs distinctions between artistic and scholarly investigations to create new knowledge through creative process and exegesis on that creative process. As one aspect of my larger research project in surfacing the role of the *Mahari* in the *Odissi* dancing body, I create a new work called *Alasa-Kanya: Sculpture in Odissi* with a group of young dancers from a range of cultural backgrounds at Kenyon College in Ohio. In this work, creative process and pedagogical inquiry intertwine to investigate *Mahari* movement in the *Odissi* repertory and in my own aesthetic practices. Sculptural posture meets

the corporeal *Mahari* body as the female sculptural figure of the *Alasa-Kanya*, known to be the mythical progenitor of the *Mahari*, comes alive in live performance. I make this piece with seven student dancers in the Department of Dance, Theatre, and Film at Kenyon College over a semester long inquiry that culminates in the Fall Dance Concert held on December 8, 9, and 10, 2016. The dancers (Pankti Dalal, Sreeya Chadavalavada, Sreela Chadavalavada, Naomi Lofchie, Nadine Hemming, Kathryn LeMon, and Ian Edwards) have a range of movement experience from beginning *Odissi* to intermediate.

My cast and I co-create *Alasa-Kanya: Sculpture in Odissi*, which I will refer to as *AK* throughout the rest of this essay. I let decisions and choices emerge throughout our collective process of making *AK*, allowing for ongoing investigation and discovery via choreographic material, music, lighting, and costuming choices. As part of my research process, I bring to the surface aspects of the *Mahari* body in *Odissi* movement vocabulary as well as performance through a systematic dissolution of the *Odissi* practice I have inherited and my reimagining of this training in my current embodied practice as a choreographer. I use Jane Bacon and Vida Midgelow's established method of structured dance improvisation called the Creative Articulations Process (CAP) to systematically dissolve my *Odissi* and surface the *Mahari* body. CAP enables the connection between the contemporary and the historical through improvisation as I reorient

my *Odissi* practice through the performative components of the *Mahari*. I imbricate this choreographic process with poststructuralist theories of deconstruction borrowing from philosopher Jacques Derrida's understanding of the historical trace that is ever-elusive and impossible to solidify.⁴³ As such, my choreographic process brings together theory and practice in the act of deconstruction and reconstruction.

In this choreography, I raise the *Mahari* from her supposed marginal position in the *Odissi* dancing body to one of primary importance to overturn the notion of a stable male center in *Odissi*. In the previous chapter on *Mahari* ritual practice, I argued that the *Mahari* nudges the patriarchal center ascribed to *Jagannath*. The *Mahari* tradition maintains a strong relationship with *Odissi* given that the dancing *Odissi* body is premised on *Mahari* ritual practice while completely obscuring the undomesticated nature of her ritual practice. *Odissi* differentiates itself from its constituent elements, the *Mahari* (temple-dancers) and the *Gotipua* (young male dancers dressed as girls), on grounds of refinement, sophistication, and classicism. *Odissi* practitioners consider the dance a classical form for its emphasis on texts, an orientation that practitioners believe makes it superior to the heterogeneous embodied and non-text-based movement lineages.

⁴³ I borrow from Derrida's seminal works *Of Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference* to understand trace, translated in English as track, path, or mark. Derrida considered trace to be the left-over of conventional meaning.

Analysis of the constituent role of the *Gotipua* is beyond the scope of this inquiry. However, the *Mahari* has been a spectral presence in the *Odissi* body as the latter shares a complex relationship with her. While the *Mahari* is indispensable for proving the cultural and historical continuity of the dance, her ritual and social sexuality outside of monogamous conjugality presents a constant anxiety in the *Odissi* body. The conservative construction of *Odissi* neuters the *Mahari* and reconfigures her as the celibate wife of *Jagannath*. Nevertheless, the sexualized or eroticized movement of the *Mahari* time and again features in the *Odissi* body, such as within the restrained twists of the *Meena-Danda* in *Odissi* repertoire;⁴⁴ classical *Odissi* asserts the male as center.

In this chapter, using my choreographic choices, I seek to subvert the male-centeredness within *Odissi* by remaining within the *Odissi* paradigm while simultaneously interrupting and expanding the formal constraints of the technical injunctions of *Odissi*. In doing so I hope to suggest the possibility of subversive practices toppling the male patriarchal bias from within the form. My choreography is a means of overturning the conventional impulse in *Odissi* of subduing the *Mahari*. I believe that the *Mahari* exists in my practice in some capacity despite inherent appropriations and policing. I further excavate her in

⁴⁴ In the previous chapter, I show the stylistic adaptation of movement motifs of the *Mahari* ritual practice by the *Odissi* technique.

movement, costumes, lighting, and music to argue that the *Mahari* is always already embedded within the repertory of *Odissi*. The following example will illuminate my process. In the process of enlivening the *Mahari* in choreography, I resist *Odissi*'s technical impositions while drawing inspiration from the historical performativity of the *Mahari*. Being a former repertory member of *Srjan* practicing Kelucharan Mohapatra style of *Odissi*, I have extensive experience in practicing torso isolations from hips as well as isolating lower body footwork from upper body twists.⁴⁵ Policing the hips during fluid torso isolations marks virtuosic bodily control in *Odissi*. I have previously argued that these techniques of isolation differentiate *Odissi* from the *Mahari* lineage revealing underlying biases in *Odissi* technique that partially appropriates the *Mahari* body while simultaneously distancing itself from the *Mahari*. In my choreographic work, I allow the hips to move and invoke full-bodied *Mahari* gestures to push back. The creative reconstruction of the performative hips of the historical temple-dancer questions the normative assumptions of the *Odissi* dancing body. Through my core practices of decentering the *Odissi* body using improvisatory, choreographic, and theoretical techniques, I surface the *Mahari* using a movement-centered inquiry.

⁴⁵ Under the direction of Ratikant Mohapatra, son of Kelucharan Mohapatra, the *Srjan* ensemble is one of the premier dance companies from India in the field of *Odissi*. Some of its productions are *Tantra*, *Ganesh Vandana*, and *Mrityu*.

Finally, following PaR scholar Robin Nelson's call for praxis—theory imbricated in practice—I borrow from Derridean deconstruction the concern that I refrain from naturalizing assumptions about *Odissi* technique that are conditioned by history, institutions, religion, or society. The *Mahari* is the primary historical practitioner whose social, sexual, and performative characteristics have the possibility of pushing limits of *Odissi*'s patriarchal construction. Her religious practice alongside her movement qualities, as I have shown earlier, introduces sexual transgression in the *Odissi* body. Hence, the *Mahari* exemplifies Derrida's eccentric center since the very condition of deconstruction may be at work within the system to be deconstructed. Following Derrida, I suggest that the *Mahari* body is always already contained within the foundational architecture of *Odissi*, and deconstructing *Odissi* requires a thorough engagement with the historical *Mahari* body. In fact, Derrida's textual focus is limiting and my praxis counters it by deploying visual, iconographic, kinetic, aural, as well as kinesthetic modalities of deconstruction.

Below, I provide selections from my choreographic research process of materializing the *Mahari* body in performance guided by my research questions. To document this practice as research and the studio process, I outline the sequential steps within my creative process. I provide curated journal entries, images from the choreographic process, sculptural source material, and the video

of the final work as evidence. After documenting the process of making this new work, I include a theoretical exegesis of my piece, using a deconstructive analysis that surfaces the *Mahari* from the margins via complex negotiations in movement that question the centrality of *Jagannath* in *Odissi*.

CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS

In this section, I lay out my choreographic process of decentering my traditional practice to make real and material the *Mahari* body in choreography. Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra style of Odissi, in which I have been trained from a young age, historically substitutes the ‘crude’ hip movements of the *Mahari* with ‘refined’ torso-isolations on stationary hips. Dance-scholar, Uttara Asha Coorlawala conjectures that “the movement techniques of the *Mahari* tradition appear subsumed into those of the *Gotipua* tradition” (272). Mohapatra, a *Gotipua* dancer in his childhood and politically aligned with the respectability politics of the nationalist reconstruction of Indian heritage, found the perfect balance between cultural continuity and socio-political respectability by restraining the hip movements of the *Mahari*. To undo the twenty-five years of bodily training, I need to decenter my customary habits in relationship to the *Odissi* vocabulary that assume value judgments regarding the unrefined and uncontrolled *Mahari* hips based on her transgressive sexuality as discussed before in her ritual

significance.⁴⁶ To dispute the assumptions in *Odissi*, I start by asking two key research questions: Where do I go to find the *Mahari* and how does she surface as embodied through dancers that have never known her before? Can I bring the *Mahari* out so that her movement overpowers my own and she displaces me as the choreographer of the piece?

To address these questions, I invent choreographic strategies by drawing prompts from sculptural sources or the *Alasa-Kanyas*, the mythical progenitors of the *Mahari*, in my own body. Using these sculptural prompts, I commission choreographic material from my cast. I highlight full-bodied re-investment of the material of the *Mahari* against the isolations between the upper and the lower body in *Odissi*. And, I use the ancillary elements of costume, music, and lighting to further draw attention to the connections with the *Mahari*.

In search of the *Mahari*, I begin by looking to the temple-sculptures since the *Mahari* is mythically known to be the descendant of the sculptural *Alasa-Kanya*. According to eminent South Asian scholar Kapila Vatsayan, the basic principles of body alignment and measurement are similar in the Indian sculptural tradition and in Indian classical dance. I find traces of these *Alasa-Kanyas* in Kaulacara Ramachandra's *Silpa Prakasa*, the architecture and sculpture manual of

⁴⁶ Here, I mean that I need to access material in *Odissi* by changing my orientation to its codified vocabulary. I need to reevaluate the entire training process and incorporate the *Mahari* within that journey.

Odishan temples. Ramachandra enlists sixteen *Alasa-Kanyas* in varying moods and engaged in various activities, such as looking at the mirror, speaking to a parrot, resentful, and with a baby. In my “Introduction,” I have justified the role of sculpture in my inquiry as a means to access the historical and mythical connections with the moving *Mahari* body. Not only did she dance among the sculptures, they were built at the same time. It is impossible to know for sure, what came first, *Mahari* movement or sculpture. It is, however, safe to say, that their paths crossed at certain historical junctures and must have influenced one another. The role of sculpture in *Odissi* is immense given the reconstruction process in the 1950s and its subsequent innovation by contemporary dancers utilizing the sculptural remnants from Odisha. In the repertory, I perform the sculptural *Bhangas* or postures all the time. Also, stone inscriptions on the temple-walls demonstrate the relationship between live dancing and sculpture. The pillars of the *Natamandira* or the dancing hall in Konark Sun temple are adorned with sculptures of the *Alasa-Kanyas* in dance poses and in poses playing the *Veena* (string instrument), *Mardala* (percussion instrument), and *Manjira* (metal cymbals). It is noted on one of the pillars that the *Natamandira* was constructed due to the suggestion of a dance-master named Sadanand Gupta (Boner 125). I cannot help but imagine the students of this dance-teacher who

were temple-dancers and their symbiotic relationship to the sculptural *Alasa-Kanyas*.

I start with my body to access the performative qualities of the historical and the mythical *Mahari* as I improvise with my embodied vocabulary in *Odissi* in relation to the temple-sculptures.⁴⁷ From these sculptures, I generate choreographic prompts using the dance-improvisation method called Creative Articulations Process (CAP), which I have detailed in the “Theories and Methods,” chapter. CAP allows me to access embodied information drawn from textual descriptions and sculptural traces of the *Alasa-Kanyas*. I also gather embodied impressions of the *Alasa-Kanyas* during my fieldwork in the temple city of Bhubaneswar, the capital of Odisha. In these embodied discoveries, I gather the remnants of the *Mahari* given the mythical and inscriptional connection between the *Alasa-Kanya* and the *Mahari*.

Accessing the temple-sculpture in my embodiment realigns my relationship to the basic vocabulary of *Odissi* dance. The *Alasa-Kanyas* present a plethora of twisting bodies on the walls of the Odishan temples (Donaldson *Hindu Temple Art of Orissa* 465). Each of the sixteen *Alasa-Kanyas* remain in the S-

⁴⁷ Anurima Banerji locates the distributed body of dance across *Mahari* ritual dance, the *Jagannath* temple, and the *Jagannath* deity (“Dance and the Distributed Body”). Taking my choreographic philosophy from Banerji, I deliberate upon the distributed understanding of the *Mahari* to the *Alasa-Kanyas* decorating the Odishan temple-walls. I refer to the body of the sculptural *Alasa-Kanya* strewn all over Odisha to excavate *Mahari* embodiment within my movement.

shaped curves of the *Tri Bhanga* or the tri-bent posture characterizing *Odissi*.

Since my childhood, I have known the *Tri Bhanga* as one of the four main *Bhangas* or postures characterizing the *Odissi* dancing body. *Bhanga* is a distinct posture in the *Odissi* vocabulary and varies depending on the degree of deflection in the body as distinctly illustrated in the texts of *Odissi* technique, such as *The Odissi Dance Pathfinder*.⁴⁸

As I recreate the *Alasa-Kanyas* in my movement, I let the sculptural injunctions contour my bodily *Bhangas*. The *Alasa-Kanyas*, namely, *Torana* (resting on a door), *Sukasarika* (sharing secrets with a companionate parrot), and *Dalamalika* (pulling a tree branch and garlanding herself with it), enact different modes of deploying the S-curve of the *Tri Bhanga* reconfigured as the embodied twist involving a spiraling in opposite directions at the waist. While the *Torana* experiences the twist at the hips with a stable torso resting against a solid structure, *Sukasarika* embodies the twist in the upper body with the lower body staying square. *Dalamalika* twists both the upper and the lower bodies as the

⁴⁸ According to this illustrated manual of *Odissi* dance published by the *Odissi* Research Centre in Bhubaneswar, the capital city of the state of Odisha, *Odissi* has four distinct *Bhangas* that act as containers for the moving body. *Sama Bhanga* is a standing posture. *Ardha Bhanga* or *Abhanga* transfers the entire body weight to one leg resulting in a slight projection of the hips to the side of the weight-bearing leg. *Tri Bhanga* is the quintessential *Odissi* posture which entails sharp bending at the knees, pelvis, and the neck demarcating three distinct divisions of the erect body. The last one is called *Chauka Bhanga*. It is a square posture in which the hands suspended at shoulder height make right angles at the elbows, the feet turn out at the hips bending at the knees, and the ankles remain at about six inches apart. *Chauka* emulates the stance of the *Jagannath* deity. According to the popular opinion, *Chauka* is considered male and *Tri Bhanga* represents the feminine body (Nrityagram).

pulling of the solid object (the tree branch) deepens the *Tri Bhanga*. My *Tri Bhanga* pose encoded by the hip-torso isolation within *Odissi* vocabulary changes in my re-encountering of the posture through the embodiment of the sculptural *Alasa-Kanya* that does not impose the repressive value judgment against policing sexuality.⁴⁹ The multiple modalities of achieving the *Tri Bhanga* through my mobilizing of the *Alasa-Kanyas* differs from the stringent representation of the *Tri Bhanga* dictated by *Odissi* technique. Drawing on CAP, I activate my senses, especially my sensations of touch and smell as I stack up my joints in S-shaped body postures of the *Alasa-Kanyas*, where the S-curvature differs in intensity with the differing *Alasa-Kanyas*.

I let the clock tick away as I continue walking through the space. I notice slight heel twists and the spinal spirals of my Meena-Danda as I perform them on, in, through, and off-time. I notice a tingling sensation in my knees. I push through those trying to accentuate, reduce, and control them. I try to sense every move. What is the felt-sense of the Meena-Danda? What will this experiential access to my Odissi technique generate?

⁴⁹ In the previous chapter, I described how *Odissi* dance technique polices *Mahari* sexuality by imposing hip-torso isolations.

From my solo investigations of the sixteen *Alasa-Kanyas*, I generate sixteen choreographic prompts to initiate the creative process with the Kenyon students and generate choreographic material.⁵⁰ Through the mythical, sculptural, and historical connections established between the *Alasa-Kanyas* and the *Mahari* body, an improvised deliberation of the *Alasa-Kanyas* contests *Odissi*'s technical injunctions. These prompts enable the generation of material within *Odissi* while bypassing its repressive technical injunctions that, I have argued in the previous chapter, repress and suppress the *Mahari*. Each prompt that I created is acting with the form while interrupting it. A brief description follows (the complete descriptions are available in the online process compendium u.osu.edu/mahari)

Never Stop

⁵⁰ In my online PaR documentation (on u.osu.edu/mahari), I document my detailed processes of accessing these embodied prompts from the *Alasa-Kanyas*.

In any static posture, there is never stillness, constantly deepening and twisting
Spiral between 2D and 3D
Pushing back against the presentational to include the width of the body and
curving in space
Neutral Tri Bhanga
Accessing the extreme torso deflections by navigating through the undeflected
center
Find Support
Sharing body weight with a partner to give the illusion of a static posture
Straight Legs and Strong Biceps
Straightening your legs and strengthening your hands while maintaining the curvy
Mahari aesthetic
Activate Senses to Bring Movement Changes
Nurturing Sense: Smelling, seeing, tasting, and feeling every execution of every
movement
Dress it Through Touch
Attending to the sensation of touch between parts of your own body and contact
with others
Stack Up
Stepping in place as you stack up your ankles, pelvic girdle, and shoulder joints
Hip Away
Flipping the technical injunction of torso isolation moving hips with a static torso
With or Without Propriety
Exploring sexual agency in movement
Parallel or Perpendicular
Playing with the parallel and perpendicular alignment of the knees by rotating the
pelvic joint
Embolden Stealth
Choosing a light source and hiding your face from it paying attention to the
shadow created
Twist
Twisting from your waist in opposing circular motions by imagining upper and
lower body to represent the upper and lower bulbs of an hour-glass respectively
Communicate While Twisting
Expressing, emoting, communicating, uttering, conveying, and venting through
the twist
Do not Ring the Bells
Controlling the sound of the bells by modulating with the strengths and accents of
footwork
Dance to my Rhythm

Creating rhythm using individual footwork, vocalization, and clapping alongside unison movement

Through these prompts, I make space for an opening of the *Mahari* in *AK*'s relationship to *Odissi*. I reconstruct the moods and object-associations of these *Alasa-Kanyas* into embodied experiences and sensations. For example, *Darpana*, the seventh *Alasa-Kanya*, holds a mirror with one hand while her other hand rests on her forehead. I dissociate this *Alasa-Kanya* from the mirror. The corresponding prompt *Dress it Through Touch* emphasizes on the sensation of touch in the dancing body. Similarly, *Torana*, the second *Alasa-Kanya*, prompts *Spiral between 2D and 3D* instead of the conventional representation of *Torana* as standing near the doorway in anticipation of her lover's arrival. In my improvisatory maneuvering, I complicate the existing narrative connections between the sculpture and the dancing body. Using CAP, I bring the experience back to the body instead of filtering it through narrative interpretations and object associations, such as the mirror for *Darpana* and the door for *Torana*. Finding bodily traces from among these sculptural associations brings me closest to the embodied movement of the *Mahari* whose body has animated the temple-spaces at various historical junctures. Through a reconfiguration of the codified technicalities with the sculptural postulations, I let the *Mahari* remain within the embodiment of the technique. I reveal the *Mahari* in the choreography.

After my own improvisations with the sculptural *Alasa-Kanyas* using CAP, I employ the choreographic prompts as points of initiation for generating movement material for the final piece with the student dancers. Alongside these choreographic prompts, I bring in images of the relevant *Alasa-Kanyas* from my fieldwork for the students to improvise upon with the visual references—the shapes, the balances, the weight-shifts, the finger-binds, and the body bends. They explore the iconographic evidence with their embodied experience of the foundational containers of *Odissi*—*Chauka* and *Tri Bhanga*—since the *Mahari* used both in her performance. Contrary to the general characteristics of movement in *Odissi*, such as lack of spatial coverage, upright alignment, and symmetrical movement, my students generate inverted, non-symmetrical, and mobile traces right at the outset. As the students start exploring the choreographic prompts and experimenting with the sculptural traces, the postural, gestural, and narrative elements evolve. They make choices regarding the degree of curvature of the S-curve in the *Tri Bhanga*. They transpose the curvilinear aesthetic of the *Meena-Danda* originally practiced by the big toe to different parts of their body as well as in different points in space. These choreographed movements decenter my subject position as the generator of movement in *AK* right from the very beginning. More importantly, they decenter my training in Kelucharan Mohapatra style of *Odissi*

by bringing in the historical and sculptural lineage within the process of creating this new choreographic work.

Before moving forward with the rest of the choreographic process, I want to preface this discussion by showing the political grounding of this PaR product that apprehends the multiplicity of the *Mahari*. Allowing the presence of difference in the studio right from the outset of creating *AK* recreates the ever-elusive identity based on mythical, ritual, religious, performative, and multimodal significance. The presence of the *Narthaki* or dancing *Alasa-Kanya* in the temple-crevices vouch for the existence of live dancing by the *Mahari*. The ritual significance of her holding the locus of the spiritual center has been discussed in the previous chapter. Her religious role as a ritual specialist was indispensable for the successful functioning of the devotional program. Her performativity gave efficacy to the worshipping practices by the male priests. Her elusive existence as the celestial *Apsara* or heavenly nymph, sculptural *Alasa-Kanya*, as well as the historical ancestor of the contemporary *Odissi* artist makes it impossible to identity her. The *Mahari* exists in a matrix of intersecting vectors, each describing a separate attribute. The democratic generation of movement by the students educated on the political forces behind *Odissi* and the marginalization of the *Mahari*, allow difference to manifest and co-exist in the creative space. The

collaborative generation of movement apprehends difference at the center of this materialization allowing for her multiplicity.

The dancers (Pankti Dalal, Sreeya Chadalavada, Sreela Chadalavada, Naomi Lofchie, Nadine Hemming, Kathryn LeMon, and Ian Edwards) have a range of movement experience from beginning *Odissi* to intermediate. Each of them except for Ian participated in my *Odissi* technique class for the entire semester. Pankti Dalal trains in *Odissi* while both Sreeya Chadalavada and Sreela Chadalavada train in *Kuchipudi*, the Indian classical dance form from the southern Indian state called Andhra Pradesh. Naomi Lofchie, Nadine Hemming, Kathryn LeMon, and Ian Edwards trains in European and African forms. Each student, with his or her own cultural background and varied movement experience, comes up with a unique vision of the *Mahari* as emerging from her sculptural avatar. Together, they break, mold, twist, and carve their incarnations of the sculptural *Mahari* in motion. The movement generated by this eclectic cast represents the multivalent and inclusive ethos. By taking away the task of generating movement from my *Odissi* body and extending it to the students, I distance as well as redefine my connection to *Odissi*. I take this risk only after ensuring that the western concert dance practices of the majority of my cast do not erase the cultural markers of the South Asian dancing body. This is what I refer to as attributing an *Odissi*-esque feel to a phrase that does not ground itself enough, or

that fails to pay attention to the fingers, the neck, the head, or the torso. This attention to *Odissi*-esque sensibilities provides a choreographic modality of acknowledging the distance between my *Odissi* body and that of the *Mahari* simultaneously preventing a violence on the South Asian dancing body by the western contemporary dancer. The *Odissi*-esque sensibility to provide a choreographic modality of acknowledging the distance between my *Odissi* body and that of the *Mahari* simultaneously preventing a violence on the South Asian dancing body by the dancer trained in western contemporary dance. I do not wish to erase difference. Rather, I accentuate it in the process of making *AK*. By taking away the task of generating movement from my *Odissi* body and extending it to the students, I distance as well as redefine my connection to *Odissi*. Using the diversity in training in my class as a possible political transposition of the ever-elusive *Mahari*, the collaborative creation of *AK* presents a contemporary imagination of the *Mahari*'s multivalent performativity.

The multivalence also shows in the wide movement range—from the twists of the *Alasa-Kanyas* to the facial expressivity of the *Mahari*. I incorporate facial expressions as a central feature in this work. While working with my cast, I emphasize the cultural and historical significance of facial expression in *Mahari*

ritual performance.⁵¹ Although *Abhinaya* or expressive performance is a central feature of *Odissi* dance, the *Mahari* expressivity was different. While *Odissi* depends on a nuanced expressional vocabulary deployed for narrative, textual, and linguistic sources, *Mahari* performance included animated facial expressions as emotional metaphors for her soul. I find it difficult to explain modes of facial expression to my cast, especially to the ones trained in Euro-American forms. In fact, I find it most challenging to explain the nuanced differences of facial expressivity between *Odissi* and *Mahari* dancing. At the outset, I have a conversation with the students regarding the religious context of this movement experience that has been concertized and brought forth to the global high art performance circuit. After finalizing the physical components of the choreographic material, I ask the students to pay attention to the face as they continue deepening the material they generated before. I ask them to weave eye movements, smiles, eye-brow raises, eye-brow constrictions, neck deflections, and head tilts into their choreography. I push them to make conscious choices about whether they choose to look inward or outward. By adding my own take on facial expressions to their choreographed material, I demonstrate how their decisions about their faces color the way they work with their bodies. After the

⁵¹ Ratna Roy asserts that *Mahari* dancing is an outpouring of the soul where the face of the *Mahari* acts as a central conduit for the emanation.

initial period of resistance, my cast responds to this choreographic requirement by including the focus as presentational, communicative, or introspective expressivity. By working with them, I am better able to articulate the multi-valence of expressivity that is often limited to third-person communicability and linguistic expressivity in the conventional *Odissi* body.

Sculpture is the central organizing thread in *AK* not only in determining facial expressions or torso twists, but also in allowing the coarse texture of stone sculpture to provide the conceptual and textural basis of movements. I did not want to smooth the edges of the movement into seamless and effortless movement. “Beauty in *Odissi* is too easily accessible,” says Chatterjea in a personal interview since she believes in the efficacy of beauty only when it is earned after an arduous process.⁵² We spent a lot of time in the studio attending to the coarseness and the rough edges of the stone sculpture from which emerged the choreographic prompts.⁵³ I let the stone texture blend into the physicality of the dancer. When students develop variations of the *Meena-Danda* or the fish-walk that graze the big toe on the floor, I ask them to accentuate the friction and feel the repercussion in the calf muscles. In my introductions of the *Alasa-Kanyas*, I make sure that my cast pays attention to the course finish of the sculptures that are

⁵² In her choreography with Ananya Dance Theatre, Chatterjea works with the foundational elements in *Odissi* dance to infuse it with issues of social justice.

⁵³ The course texture and the broken sculptural fragments feature visually in my digital rendition of the *Mahari* impressions that I elaborate in my next chapter.

also worn and torn with age. Movement purged through this frictional resistance syncs both the upper and lower bodies in one orientation without following the necessary injunction of *Odissi* technique that demarcates the body into two halves seemingly working in opposition to each other. In *Odissi*, the lower body denotes percussive and staccato complexity while the upper body denotes gestural difficulty and lyrical fluidity. Having the textural uniformity in both upper and lower bodies, that is in gesture and footwork respectively, I find the sculptural surface setting the tone of my piece within the folds of *Odissi* while simultaneously pushing the dual folds of *Odissi* movement.

To further substitute my *Odissi* self with the *Mahari*, I draw inspiration for the musical accompaniment of *AK* from sculpture and ritual. My musical choices literally surface from the *Alasa-Kanyas*, the *Sakhala Dhupa* or the morning ritual, and *Pahuda Alati* or the evening ritual of the *Mahari* in the *Jagannath* temple. A male drummer accompanied the *Mahari* performance during *Sakhala Dhupa*. I ascribe a secondary status to the male drummer by re-imagining the rhythmic component of the *Mahari* through the sculptural *Alasa-Kanya*.⁵⁴ Unlike the general trend in *Odissi*, in which the dancers follow the cues from the live musicians or recorded musical accompaniment, here, the musicians follow the

⁵⁴ I refer to *Mardala* (drummer) or the sixteenth *Alasa-Kanya* and the textual verses of the *Gita Govinda* that the *Mahari* recited and sang for the evening ritual.

choreography minutely to draw their cues from the dancers. Musical accompaniment follows the movement in two successive stages. First, I accompany the dancers with rhythmic and narrative vocalizations by uttering the mnemonic syllables and singing verses from the *Gitagovinda*. In this process, I draw my cues from the students' movements. Second, I work with a drummer, Vineet Bailur, who punctuates my vocal cues with his percussive hand-drumming. Bailur depends on me and the dancers to find open spaces in order to introduce his drumming. The dancers have primacy in this entire process since they determine and dictate the terms and conditions for the accompanying music. The sixteenth *Alasa-Kanya* or the *Mardala* (drummer) proclaims *Dance to My Rhythm*, the choreographic prompt that I derived from her in the first place. Music has been internalized in the choreographic process such that *Mardala* sets the tone of the work at the very outset.⁵⁵ The entirety of the piece moves to my metronomic rhythmic accompaniment on the microphone with Bailur's drumming improvising in the gaps generated between my rhythmic vocalization. Bailur's drumming is secondary to my percussive cuing. During the evening ritual, the *Mahari* sang from the verses of the *Gitagovinda* without any musical accompaniment. In that vein, I sing the narrative verses without the drums at the

⁵⁵ As the female live accompaniment in *AK*, I personify the *Mardala* attributing the musical accompaniment of the piece to her through my vocal rendition.

end of Act III. The poetic lyrics animate the dancers' expressive gestural movements. By including minimal musical accompaniment in the form of my rhythmic and musical vocals alongside Bailur's sparse drumming, I invite the viewers to focus on movement in *Odissi* while placing the *Mahari* at the very center.

Costuming and lighting aid the recreation of the *Mahari* by connecting *AK* to the sartorial and ambient influences accompanying the historical *Mahari*. I work with costume designers, Tatjana Longerot and Deborah Clark to devise appropriate measures of recreating her in the costumes and accessories during the performance. We get the clothing, jewelry and head decor from India because it is important to me to give the students a connection to these richly ornamented and textured materials. The *Mahari* wraps the *Sari* around her body during her ritual performance. The convention of wrapping inspires the costuming convention used in *AK*. Here, all the dancers are wrapped in *Saris* unlike the contemporary *Odissi* dancer who wears stitched costumes.⁵⁶ From my own experiencing of wearing the *Sari*, I can safely express that dancing in the *Sari* can be quite difficult given the multiple folds of fabric around the dancer's body. To commemorate her sartorial choices while being able to dance comfortably, the female dancers wear practice

⁵⁶ Uttara Asha Coorlawala tells us that the current costuming convention was started by twentieth century revivalist Rukmini Devi Arundale in *Bharatnatyam* that was then adapted to *Odissi* dance ("The Sanskritized Body" 45).

Saris, which are shorter in length and width than full length *Saris*. While Ian wears a full-length *Sari*, the fabric wraps around the two legs individually enabling him to move his limbs with ease. The one male dancer had the *Sari* around his waist and lower body while the six female dancers had the *Saris* wrapped covering their lower as well as upper bodies. The male dancer danced with a bare upper-body. I made this deliberate choice to undo a historical process. For hundreds of years, the *Mahari* performed bare-chested in front of the male *Jagannath*.⁵⁷ In this carnal rendition of the *Mahari* ritual performance, I made a choice of inverting that historical process. I cover the upper bodies of the female dancers while keeping the male dancer bare-chested. Gender does not have an explicit role in *AK* except in this costuming decision where I choose to differentiate between the male and the female dancer.

While costumes connect to the historical body of the *Mahari*, lighting designer Matt Hazard maintains a parallel relationship to my thematic organization of the three acts. By working closely with the Hazard, I accentuate the ritual quality of the work. Act I and Act III draw inspiration from the rituals in the *Jagannath* temple. Here, Hazard plays with light and shadow memorializing the *Mahari*'s performance at the confluence of the *Natamandira* (dancing hall)

⁵⁷ Apffel-Marglin describes the ritual performance of the *Mahari* in which she performed bare-chested in front of the male Hindu deity (*Wives of the God King* 67). Going into the mechanics of this ritual is beyond the scope of this dissertation. But the act of baring the upper body is important in this choreographic recreation as I invert the sartorial process in *AK*.

and the *Garba-Griha* (inner sanctum) of the *Jagannath* temple. This originary site of *Mahari* ritual is not well-lit with very little to no access to light. During the day, sunlight enters through the north and south doors of the *Natamandira*. At night, the oil lamps used for ritual worship of *Jagannath* provide the light for the evening performance by the *Mahari*. Bringing out the melancholic and erotic tenor of the *Gitagovinda* in the last scene, I establish a sense of longing at the end of *AK*. Hazard's play with light and dark in Acts I and III contrasts with his use of bright lights in Act II to evoke the joyful sense of myth and history surrounding the mythical legends of the *Mahari*. Hence, both costumes and lights aid the choreographic recreation of the *Mahari* in movement.

In summary, the choreographic process of *AK* entail the periodic substitution of the *Odissi* body with that of the *Mahari*. In addition to the above description, I provide detailed journal entries and photographic images in my web documentation delineating the means of deriving my choreographic prompts and of transposing those into movement through my collaborative encounters with my students. In the following section, I describe the performance using movement description that explicitly surfaces the *Mahari*.

DESCRIPTION OF CHOREOGRAPHIC OUTCOME

Alasa-Kanya: Sculpture in Odissi presents a non-linear journey of the *Mahari* by reminiscing on her kinetic, mythical, and ritual elements sequenced in

three Acts. What follows is a detailed description of the three Acts. Acts I and III evoke the ritual elements of the *Mahari* tradition while Act II detours into invoking the significance and interpretations of the rituals. The ritual practice organizes the movement material generated by my cast by deconstructing the sculptural *Alasa-Kanya*. In *AK*, the mythically sculptural *Alasa-Kanya* intersects with the ritually potent *Mahari* body. Act I starts with the *Meena-Danda* or the fish walk gait introducing the *Mahari* repertory at the very outset.⁵⁸ Act II takes a dip into memory, myth, and folklore exploring the multivalent associations of the *Mahari* with the world of Hindu gods and goddesses. Act III presents a combination of a narrative solo and an abstract group choreography simultaneously taking place on the right and left sides of the stage respectively bringing *AK* to a melancholic conclusion. *AK* foregrounds the *Mahari*'s rhythmic and expressive movement repertory bringing her alive in the *Odissi* dancing body while contextualizing the latter as premised on the *Mahari* movement tradition. *Act I*. Act I juxtaposes the static imagery of the sculptural *Alasa-Kanyas* with the serpentine motility of the *Meena-Danda*. The already twisted configurations of the static *Alasa-Kanyas* of the Odishan temples are made to come alive with the spiraling motions of the *Meena-Danda*. The stasis in the sculpted figures is

⁵⁸ In the previous chapter, I have delineated the percussive and the expressive movement vocabulary of the *Mahari* salvaging her movement from within her ritual activity.

enlivened by the serpentine motility of the live historical body of the *Mahari* visualizing the confluence of the live and the mediated histories of the temple-dancers. Hands clasped over the head with interlaced fingers recreate the imagery of *Alasa*, the first *Alasa-Kanya* in which *Alasa* means languor. The dancers graze through the space in restrained progression treating the parts of their body as sculptural fragments that fit together in an uneasy combination. A static configuration of fingers interlaced, torsos deflected, necks curved, and full-bodied bends characterize the first few minutes into the piece as the dancers move their upper and lower bodies in unison. This contrasts sharply with the lyrical and seamless motion of the *Odissi* upper body. Unlike the strategies of opposition, sequencing, and isolation that *Odissi* movement deploys between the upper and the lower body, Act I explicates reconfigurations of the *Odissi* vocabulary by establishing the opaque and solid sculptural texture in the moving *Odissi* body. It explicitly connects to the sculptural avatar of the *Mahari*, that is, the *Alasa-Kanya* as one version of her choreographic realization.

As clusters of stone fragments, dancers in Act I move in spiraling pathways magnifying and transposing *Meena-Danda's* serpentine curves from individual dancing bodies onto the entire stage. The *Meena-Danda* connects the individualized movement of the *Mahari* to abstract spiral patterns created by the dancers in space using unison movement and group choreography. The

curvilinear pattern becomes the principal organizing feature of covering space through the movement. The dancers curve their ways from upstage right to upstage left through a detour to downstage center. Every dancer participates in a joint exposition of the spiraling gestures of the *Mahari*.

Act I introduces the movement components of morning and evening *Mahari* ritual by drawing from abstract and narrative elements respectively. While demonstrating them in tandem with one another, *AK* questions the usual dichotomy of *Odissi* separating pure dance (*Nritta*) and narrative expression (*Natya*). I accompany Act I with my vocalization of the *Ektali* or a rhythmic cycle with four beats: *Ta Iti Naka Thini* ending with a narrative sequence from the *Gitagovinda*: *Vedanu Dharate Jagannai Vahate*. Although this song exists in the canonical repertory in *Odissi*, I reimagine these verses through a negotiation between rhythmic and abstract gesturing on one hand and narrative expressivity on the other. At the center, Sreeya Chadalavada and Pankti Dalal portray the ten avatars of Hindu male deity *Visnu* using hand movements and *Mudras*. The remaining cast goes around them in a circular fashion, their hands tied in *Alasa* ruminating on the *Alasa-Kanyas*. Both the groups of dancers maintain the same footwork; *Tri Bhanga* six that has a combination of toe, heel, and flat stomps. While the duo circle in position, the rest of the dancers revolve around them covering the entire stage as they periodically obscure the duo from the frontal

view. By juxtaposing the traditional performance of the narrative expressions with abstract gesturing and posturing of the *Mahari* sculpted with *Alasa*, Act I does not elevate the male center as the center of attention in the choreography. The male center is rotating and so are the peripheral *Alasa*-s. The elevation of the male *Visnu* is undermined as the focus keeps shifting from the center to the periphery and vice versa. Attention is divided between the performers showing the ten incarnations of *Visnu* and the abstract *Tri Bhangas* with interlaced fingers of the dancers moving along the circumference of the circle. As a corollary, it pushes against the narrative-expressive-rhythmic-abstract distinctions made in conventional *Odissi* repertoire. It transcends the verbal-abstract dichotomy established in the *Odissi* repertory as live dancing bodies mediate the movements of the *Maharis* braiding text, rhythm, sculpture, ritual, and performative aesthetics. *AK* reconstructs the *Mahari* in fragments of sculptural, narrative, and rhythmic juxtaposition. The *Mahari* makes way for *AK*'s choreographic strategies and surfaces in her element that refutes the distinction drawn in *Odissi* between abstract gesticulation and narrative expressivity, heralding the male Hindu deity. This undermines the unquestioned elevation attributed to the male center, since *Jagannath* and *Visnu* are one and the same, who provides the foundational structure to conventional *Odissi* repertoire.

Entry Sequence: Lights turn on illuminating two clusters of dancers wearing red, blue, pink, and purple colored Saris. A group of five with bulging torsos and hips remain in upstage right. On the downstage left, a duo stands upright in parallel; hands firmly resting on the hips as the thumbs press onto the hip bones. Karataka Gadi Ghene Dha Karataka Gadi Ghene Dha Karataka Gadi Ghene Dha, I start with the mnemonic syllables of the Tihai, the set of rhythmic syllables repeated three times, marking the distinct beginning of AK. The group on the upstage right marches with controlled aggression towards the two dancers on the downstage left. The former moves forward with their toes grazing the floor in straight and circular patterns with turned out feet. They interlace their hands to the right of their faces. While they accentuate their Tri Bhargas, the two dancers downstage sit in broad Chaukas repeating the Abarta Puspita, the cycle of a flower as a bud to full blossom through its interaction with the sun. Drawing circular pathways with their arms assisted by wrist rolls, elbow rotations, and cascading fingers, the duo softens the square posture emulating Jagannath.

Act I critiques the gendered attribution of posture—*Chauka* to the male *Jagannath* and *Tri Bhanga* to the female *Alasa-Kanya* that is the usual perception in the *Odissi* dancing community. In an interview on national news, famous

Nrityagram ensemble demonstrates how *Chauka* and *Tri Bhanga* refer to male and female postures. Questioning the stereotypical association of *Odissi* postures with gender, I complicate the elevated position of stasis enjoyed by *Jagannath*. The entry sequence as described above, improvises on the usual entry sequences of canonical choreography in *Odissi* based on the *Meena-Danda* or the *Mahari*'s quintessential signature move. Wider circular motions of the toes grazing the floor replace the conventional *Meena-Danda* that usually restricts the feet movement under the pelvic girdle. The five dancers starting upstage right move towards the duo downstage left who apparently posture as *Jagannath* through their respective *Chauka*. However, the dancers in *Chauka* denote the flowering process, a potentially soft image most characteristic of a female character. The flowering gestures portray a constant renewal of the creative process within the life-cycle of a flower from a bud to a full blossom and eventual decay. The movement called *Abarta Puspita* because it represents the life cycle of a flower. *Abarta* means rotational and *Puspita* means flowering. During my fieldwork in Odisha, Suhag Nalini Das unassumingly demonstrated *Abarta Puspita* in her living room claiming that it belonged to the *Mahari* tradition. The movement was codified by the *Odissi* Research Center as the eighth step of the *Chauks* given the eight footsteps marking the four beat rhythmic cycle *Ektali*. The center of *Odissi*, the idol of *Jagannath* also goes through this process of regeneration every fourteen

years when the older idol is replaced by a new one in the *Jagannath* temple in Puri. But, this regenerative notion is hardly foregrounded in *Odissi* as a sense of stasis maintains around the image of *Jagannath* while the *Mahari* body provides the mobile periphery.

Bringing the notion of a constant cycle of generation and regeneration with *Jagannath* softens the image of the immobile central core in *Odissi*. The concatenation of *Jagannath* with the flowering *Abarta Puspita* upsets the stoic image of *Jagannath* as the stereotypical male figure untouched by the process of generation and decay. Similarly, the entrants from the upstage right with their tri-bent postures push against the stereotypical association of femininity and softness with their *Tri Bhangas*. They maintain stiff bodies while travelling downstage mechanically exaggerating the dictates of the *Meena-Danda*. Treating their bodies as non-malleable stone fragments of sculptural *Alasa-Kanyas*, I question the simplistic linear correlation between femininity and *Tri Bhanga*. The dancers treat their bodies as stone sculptures that do not change their course textures and shapes. They firmly maintain their S-curves throughout the sequence without the soft and lyrical transitions of the conventional *Tri Bhanga*. Hence, this entry sequence unsettles the stereotypical association of *Jagannath* in *Odissi* as the male protector distant from his earthly consorts or the *Maharis* needing protection. Through movement, the piece sets the disorienting tone right from the

very beginning by upsetting the stereotypical postural connections delineating the center and the margin in *Odissi*. Hence, with this work I reinscribe *Chauka* and *Tri Bhanga* with the differing-deferring gestures of the historical and sculptural *Mahari*, in which the postures lose their rigidity as deployed in *Odissi* technique.

Act II. Diving into the legends, myths, and religious interpretations of *Mahari* ritual performativity, Act II recreates the ritual aura of the *Mahari* through movement. According to Harapriya *Mahari*, the ritual significance of her performance is similar to the illusive universe of celestial love-making, dancing, singing, and joyous merriment between the female goddess *Radha*, the male god *Krishna*, and the *Gopis* or cowherdesses (Apffel-Marglin *Wives of the God King* 67). Carnal love becomes the only possible medium of accessing divine love and the ritual singing and dancing recreates such a divine scenario. The divinity according to this interpretation is rooted in the embodied performance traces performative of love-making. In Act II, I draw inspiration from Harapriya *Mahari*'s interpretation of her dance as this divine play as it navigates between the ethereal, material, and sculptural. The dancers navigate the ethereal as they enact the love-play in *Vrindavan* where *Krishna* spent his childhood. Wrapping their arms around each other's waists, they genuinely enjoy clapping with their partners recreating the immense joy in their material bodies. See-sawing their arms in the air while simultaneously raising their feet till their thighs, they hint at

the ankle-bells on their feet. In this way, they refer to the *Mahari*'s use of ankle-bells as well as the sculptural *Nupurapadika* or the *Alasa-Kanya* wearing her anklets. They tighten their palms folding at their wrists as if emulating mirrors recreating the *Darpana* or the *Alasa-Kanya* looking at the mirror.

Throughout Act II, the dancers constantly move reconfiguring themselves in multiple formations: duets and trios marking the merry-making of *Radha*, *Krishna*, and the *Gopis* in Vrindavana. The dancers partner with each other, finding support in balances and sharing weight. The incessant turns of the trios, either in place or across the periphery of the stage add to the group dynamics accentuating the intensity of action. This section buzzes with activity with each dancer moving independently at first and finally culminating in the jumps in unison. They hold the symbolic flute that is the quintessential symbol for *Krishna* or *Jagannath* given their parallel associations in *Vaishnavism*; the male Hindu deity is therefore regarded as the static and elevated center of *Odissi*. The sweating bodies jumping together while holding the flute shows the collective spirit of the group making it impossible to disregard the material bodies of the dancers. At the end of Act I, Sreeya, while holding the flute, travels from one side of the stage to the other. The same gestural flute comes back in Act II, but only as a collective possibility. *Krishna* is now dispossessed of his centrality as each of the seven dancers end Act II with the gestural flute possibly playing it to fill the

void for the missing music. This way I repurpose the quintessential symbol of the male center in *Krishna* and use it in as an abstract image while evoking a collective possibility. The abstract, the rhythmic, and the expressive intertwine in the gestural capacity of the flute complicating its original relationship with the male Hindu god.

Act III. *AK* ends with a solo recreation of the narrative evening ritual act of the *Mahari* in Act III. Act III closes on a melancholic note where it reconfigures a canonical expressive repertory in *Odissi* into a personal essay by the *Mahari* expressing her anger at her historical rejection. Bailur's drumming stops in Act III and I no longer recite the percussive syllables. Instead, I sing the verses from the *Gitagovinda* recreating the intimate setting of the evening ritual of the *Mahari* in which she sings to the lyrics of the *Gitagovinda*. The section starts with Pankti standing at the stage right performing expressive gestures to my singing of the *Gitagovinda*, *Yahi Madhav Yahi Kesava*. In these narrative expressions, *Radha* reprimands *Krishna* for having cheated on her. Pankti Dalal, who has been training in *Odissi* for over ten years, imbibes what Roy refers to as the 'outpouring of the soul.' In her narrative exposition, Dalal substitutes the *Odissi Abhinaya* by the outpouring of the *Mahari*. Anxious facial expressions evidenced by wrinkled and raised eye-brows, big eyes, taught lips, and heavy breathing characterize Pankti's lexicon of movements in this narrative solo. I imagine the

Mahari surfacing in Pankti's expressive vocabulary. The minimal lighting recreates the nocturnal ritual in the darkness of the *Garba-Griha* or the inner sanctum lit only by the oil lamps. However, unlike the traditional deployment of *Abhinaya* in *Odissi* where the dancer converses with the audience in an impersonal encounter, in *AK*, the *Mahari* in student dancer, Dalal's embodiment does not address *Krishna* but talks to Kaustavi. Sitting on a mattress on the stage right, the *Mahari*'s glaring glance and mournful gestures are directed towards her *Odissi* avatar, my *Odissi* body. As her contemporary counterpart, I continue cheating on her by appropriating her movement and gaining currency in world arts contexts. I set up the piece in ways that undermines my signatory authority on this choreography. While I sing the narrative material for Dalal, the rest of the cast functions as a self-sustaining unit as they create their own rhythm as a collective activity. They remain on the stage right move in a circle while holding the oil lamp using hand gestures. Together, they come up with a sense of equilibrium stepping, turning, walking, and sitting in unison. These dancers start with a rhythmic cue by Ian Edwards, *Dha Dhi Na Na Thu Na*. Eventually, they perform in silence emulating the silence surrounding the *Mahari* body in the history of *Odissi*.

CONCLUSION

AK rewrites the traditional religious significances mobilizing centers and margins in *Odissi*. *AK* constantly changes, every time upending what it has shown previously. For example, it momentarily adheres to the centrality of the male Hindu god only to place him at the same level as that of the rest of the female dancers. This complicates the usual hierarchy enjoyed by *Jagannath*. *AK* not only complicates this presupposition, but it overturns it as we see *Krishna* following *Radha* and bowing down to her. I imagine that he is asking for her forgiveness. The sculptural *Alasa-Kanya* and the historical *Mahari* playfully weave into this *Radha-Krishna-Gopi* dialectic. Every path covered by every dance reminisce the *Meena-Danda* inscribing the signatory *Mahari* aesthetic at the center of all narrative and rhythmic expressivity of *AK*. Both *Radha* and *Krishna* following *Radha* weave out of the initial circle using the *Meena-Danda*. The serpentine tracing of the *Meena-Danda* deconstructs the transcendental ego of the male center in *Odissi*. This trace becomes the underlying Derridean trace that maintains a sense of placelessness in the present. The *Mahari*, while physically absent, haunts the contemporary *Odissi* body. She lurks in every phrase escaping the repressive logic of truth as conflated with *Jagannath* within *Odissi*. She dances not within essentializing tendencies of devotional supplication or sexuality, but around the meanderings of *Odissi's* postural and gestural injunction refuting it the

permanency of the notion of a stable core ensuring the core to be an array of difference—differing and deferring twisting bodies.

This choreographic analysis scrutinizing contemporary performance for locations of historical embodiment places the practicing body of the dancer at center stage. Previously, scholars have connected the contemporary Indian classical dancing body with the temple-dancer through the object-oriented associations of *Saris*, jewelry, and ankle-bells. In *AK*, the accessories, costumes and the lighting, integral to this process of reinvigorating the hidden, accentuate the surfacing of the *Mahari* by helping to recreate the centrality of *Mahari* ritual performativity in *Odissi*. More importantly, with this work I urge for a thorough exploration of *Mahari* embodiment in contemporary *Odissi* practice. Since my childhood, I have heard *Odissi* Gurus describing *Odissi* movement as half circle and full circle. However, *AK* is more about the unfinished circles and the spiraling patterns, partly orchestrated through a conscious deliberation on the and partly enabled through the deconstructive maneuvers of preventing the existence of the transcendental center. Through the centerless circular pathways of the *Meena-Danda*, the *Mahari* unhinges the male center of *Odissi*. PaR as a field claims the veracity of the work alongside its written exegesis as research. I urge my readers to refer to the video of *AK* as an approximation of the actual experience of the live performance and durable document.

Historical, mythical, religious, and sculptural mediations of the female mover intersect at the choreographic moment where the mediation of the *Mahari* switches from the third person to the first challenging the expressive norm in *Odissi*. The historical *Mahari* binds *Alasa-Kanya: Sculpture in Odissi* through the centering of the spiraling pattern of the *Meena-Danda*. The religious *Mahari* as *Radha* comes through the gestural moves of the *Gitagovinda* who recognizes her existence as contingent upon the presence of the male deity. She presents her affinity towards him through the devotional rhetoric of the *Das Avatar* (ten avatars of *Krishna*) as well as the sensual words of *Yahi Madhava* (Damn you *Krishna*). The *Mahari* also emerges as the mythical and the sculptural through the repeated quoting of the multiple *Alasa-Kanyas*. She comes alive through the arches of the toes, the pressure of the heels against the ground, the articulations of the neck administering the focus of the eyes, and the ability to create communication, rhythm, and music through bodily postures and poses. Going by her twisted moves, she comes out into the open, from the crevices of the stone sculptures, the folds of the embodied *Bhangas*, the darkness of the *Garba-Griha*, the coldness of the floors of the *Natamandira*, and the dampness of the tears she shed in isolation. The *Odissi Abhinaya* relies on the third-person performativity of the soloist who always performs, represents, and gestures towards the characters while personifying the devotion towards *Jagannath*. Converting third person

interaction to first person interaction, *AK* brings alive the *Mahari* performativity to the fore punctuating the conventional norms of contemporary *Odissi*.

Chapter 4: *Mahari* in Mediation⁵⁹

This chapter is the written supplement for my PaR component in digital mediation in 3D animation. I collaborated with animator Steven Conroy to develop a 3D animation sequence that imbricates my choreographic and technological practice with theoretical concerns from performance studies and digital humanities.

Name: *Out-ing Mahari: Sculptural Fragments* (2017)

Date of Creation: May 2016 to May 2017

Venue: Advanced Computing Center for Arts and Design at The Ohio State University

Length: 5 minutes

Description: This collaborative encounter of dance and technology surfaces the historical *Mahari* in my motion captured movement where my movements accentuate her movements and the 3D environment establishes the sculptural and architectural associations of the *Mahari* with the Hindu temples of Odisha.

Durable Document: u.osu.edu/Mahari and digital file.

⁵⁹ This chapter is accompanied by the URL u.osu.edu/mahari that documents my PaR experimentations with 3D animation.

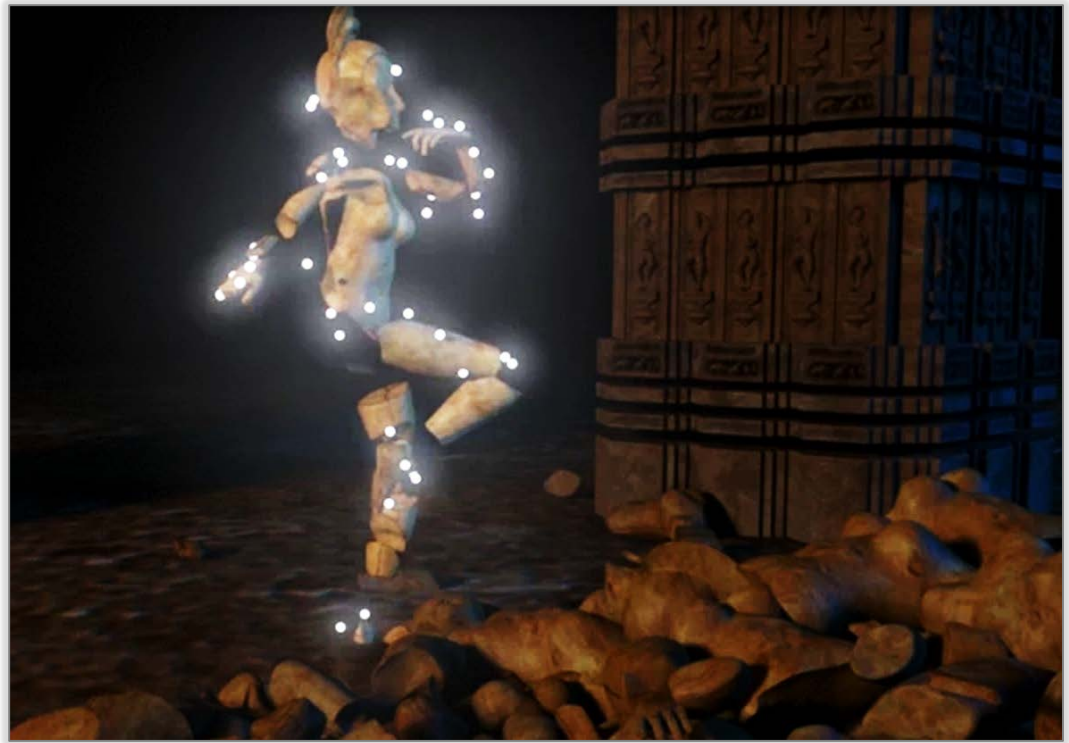


Fig 3. 3D Model Dancing to my Motion Captured Movement. Screen Shot.

In this chapter, I surface the *Mahari* via an iterative process of studio and digital practices while grounding my Practice-as-Research (PaR) investigation in digital mediation.⁶⁰ I highlight the full-bodied gesticulation and the serpentine movement qualities of the *Mahari* in digitized mediations of solo choreographic explorations. Then, I use motion capture technology to digitize these movements into 3D data that in turn animates computer generated 3D models. My studio

⁶⁰ In this chapter, I draw inspiration from a series of choreographic projects at the intersection of dance and technology attending to the embodied dimensions of both movement and computing taken up by artist/academics namely, Susan Kozel, Susan Broadhurst (2012; 2009; 1999), Chris Salter (2015; 2010), and Johannes Birringer (2008; 1998).

experiments affect my computing investigations and vice versa. My choreography translates to data and its subsequent adaptations in 3D animation while my tinkering with this data in animation influences my choreography as I incorporate the experience of computationally manipulating my embodied data into the studio.⁶¹ Reincorporating the computerized variations of my motion into my originary movement sequence, I allow for minute alterations in each iteration of choreography that further translates into data. Establishing an iterative process of experimentation between my studio and computing practices, I ask: Does motion capture mediation trouble the hierarchy of text in *Odissi* movement? Can technological mediation also mediate history?

In order to answer these questions, I experiment with my movement data to create multiple iterations of 3D animation products while imbricating critical theory within my computational practice as well as in the analysis of that practice. First, I explore my own creation of *Iteration I*, *Iteration II*, and *Iteration III* to understand the computational processes at work in the conversion of my movement into animation. To further nuance my inquiry, I collaborate with 3D animator, Steven Conroy developing a 3D animation sequence called *Out-ing Mahari: Sculptural Fragments*⁶² in which my movement animates a 3D model

⁶¹ I incorporate the interpolations of F-curves during the process of cleaning the 3D data of my motion capture session as I execute the motion in my *Odissi* technique.

⁶² *Out-ing Mahari: Sculptural Fragments*, available on u.osu.edu/mahari, is my second PaR product that accompanies my dissertation.

inspired from temple-sculpture.⁶³ Using performance studies scholar Judith Butler, digital humanities scholar N. Katherine Hayles, and literary theorist Nicholas Royle, I theorize mediation across history and digital technology. The *Mahari* surfaces in the digital realm from within my embodied gestures, but, only after undergoing a break from the codified vocabulary of the *Odissi* canon. The digital realm allows for the embodied emanation of the historical *Mahari* to further infuse embodiment, defined as always already multi-modal, into my *Odissi* practice.

In this essay, I define embodiment by paying attention to the representational codes of the medium of instantiation, making an argument for technology as embodied, and vouching for the importance of historical incorporation to embodiment. An incorporating practice, according to Hayles, is “an action that is encoded into bodily memory by repeated performances until it becomes habitual” (199). By recognizing the organic incorporating practices of the human voice in magnetic tape recordings, Hayles contests the stereotypical binary characterization of embodied live body and disembodied technology. She argues that the incorporating practice constitutes embodiment differently in different modes of mediation fighting against the notion of abstract information

⁶³ This is the PaR outcome of my experimentation with digital mediation that I have delineated at the beginning of this chapter.

differentiated from the material of instantiation. In her historical contextualization of how information lost its body across cybernetics, artificial intelligence, computational biology, information technologies, and cognitive science, Hayles demonstrates the construction of information/ materiality hierarchy as the cause of a Platonic force in Western liberal humanist tradition "privileging the abstract as the real and downplaying the importance of material instantiation" (13). Given the role of the liberal human subject in the disembodiment of *Odissi* via the repressive textual canon,⁶⁴ I draw inspiration from Hayles's hopes to "put back into the picture the flesh that continues to be erased" in contemporary discussions about cybernetic subjects as well as the liberal human subject (5). The author does so by paying attention to the representational codes of medium of instantiation, transmission, and mediation, such as the human body, gramophone recording, magnetic tape, CD rom, and paper book. Borrowing from Hayles's theorization of

⁶⁴ Avanthi Meduri characterizes the Indian classical dancing body as always determined by a textual paradigm as she describes the historical contributions of the Orientalist scholars in reviving, translating, and preserving ancient Hindu scriptures written in *Sanskrit*, such as, the *Natyasastra* and the *Abhinaya Darpana*. The emergence of classical dance as a highly reputed category is intrinsically linked to the emergence of the Orientalist archive that highlighted the documentation of the textually marred rich movement technique prevalent in ancient India. The attribution of a linear historical transmission from these ancient textual lineages to the twentieth century *Maharis* happened at the cost of marginalizing the embodied practices of the latter to the linguistic domain of the former. The textual praxis became the foundational premise of *Odissi* while the *Maharis* were instrumentalized to argue for the unbroken lineage of the dance from the heavenly *Apsaras* (celestial maidens) or the earthly *Padmavati*, Jayadeva's wife who was also a temple-dancer, to the current day *Odissi* dancers. This textual basis was enforced by British Orientalists and Hindu elites posing as Indian national cultural revivalists—both representing the British liberal humanist tradition. As the hallmark of binary dichotomy, this subject was at the inception of the construction of Indian classical dance, thus prompting Meduri to discard any possibility of salvaging the body.

technological mediation, I use incorporation as always already representing the possibility of the co-existence of the medium of instantiation and the instantiated. My medium of instantiation is my movement captured using the principle of light via optical markers attached to my body, whose hermeneutic movements convert into animations via binary translation. The instantiated incorporations in digital mediation culminate my historical search of the *Mahari* in celluloid, stone sculpture, live dancing, choreography, and ritual performativity. Hence, my movement motion captured as 3D data instantiates the incorporating practices of *Mahari* dancing—full-bodied motility, spiraling spinal columns, minimal gesturing—evidenced from the fragmentary traces (*Given to Dance*). In this investigation, embodiment occurs at the juxtaposition of live dancing and digital mediation as I surface the incorporating practices of the *Mahari* in my digitized movement via an iterative experimentation process.

Here, I use a methodology of dance practice imbricated with theory in the technological domain to deconstruct existing understanding of both dance and technology. Dance often feeds research investigations as objects of analysis (Popat and Palmer 416). PaR scholar Kim Vincs proposes that PaR scholarship by dance practitioners deconstructs the traditional structure of studying dance as an object of investigation to having movement as a principle means of investigation (99). While reflecting on his collaboration with motion capture technology,

postmodern dancer Bill T. Jones believes that the ability to abstract movement from the embodied instantiation of the live dancing body creates a “poetic parallel virtual incarnation” (107). He draws parallels between the removal of dance from the source to take on a different identity in choreographer as educator and choreographer as data generator. In the first case, the dance lives in other bodies while in the second it lives in the virtual environment. In my experiment, Jones’s deployment of the term incarnation has an interesting semblance to both digital animation and Hindu mythology. In digital mediation, through an iterative engagement with poststructuralist theory and dance practice, I surface elements of the historical *Mahari* who is encapsulated in Hindu mythical associations. I imbricate theories of embodiment by Butler, Hayles, and Royle respectively with my studio and technological practice. Intermedia artist/ scholar Susan Broadhurst describes the purpose of engaging technology in a creative practice as ‘ahistorical amnesia’ breaking away from history. On the contrary, my engagement with technology brings together the discussion regarding the historical incorporations of the *Mahari* with that regarding contemporary technology.

My motion capture process consists of three separate capture sessions, each influencing and influenced by my experiments with choreography in the studio as well as my trials in 3D animation in the computer laboratory. I incorporate the characteristic features of *Mahari* ritual performance in my

choreography for the motion capture session. The first capture culminates in *Iteration I* in which I use a default avatar⁶⁵ to technologically recreate the processes in which *Mahari* gesticulation markedly differs from the linguistic gesturing of my *Odissi* body. From *Iteration I*, I learn that the digital medium can dissociate my *Odissi* choreographies from its textual hypercodifications while making possible other modalities of communication. I bring my embodied experiences of working with the digital medium to the studio for making the second choreographic iteration of the *Mahari*. The data from this session is used to create the next two iterations. *Iteration II* and *Iteration III* demonstrate the curvature of my moving body that moves according to the choreographic dictates of my imagination of the historical *Mahari* already disrupting the linguistic infrastructure of the *Odissi* body. In *Iteration II*, I attach ink markers to my spine and right ankle to notice the S-curves within the body and the serpentine curves on the floor respectively. *Iteration III* maps the entire sequence creating a motion signature separate from my moving body using different colors to distinguish my head, hands, and feet. These two experiments surface the *Mahari* in the digital medium in the form of her signature movements. Unlike the surfacing of the

⁶⁵ Electronic artist/ theorist, Gregory Little defines the avatar as a “mythic figure with its origin in one world projected or passing through a form of representation appropriate to a parallel world. The avatar is a delegate, a tool or instrument allowing an agency to transmit signification to a parallel world.” I establish such a parallel and intimate relationship between my *Odissi* movement and my digital mediation suggesting that the latter is an embodied instantiation of the historical *Mahari* body.

temple-dancer in ankle-bells and jewelry of the contemporary Indian classical dancer, the digital medium surfaces her physical movements and performative qualities. Once again, I return to the studio to further these digitally accentuated markers of the *Mahari* body for the final motion capture session. The capturing of this version of my movement feeds my collaborative process with Steve Conroy. Before sharing my data with Conroy, I clean the F-curves of this data using the *Motionbuilder* software interpolating wherever necessary to get rid of the noise generated during the algorithmic translation from my live movement to 3D data in order to remain as close as possible to my choreography. I collaborate with Conroy with this version of my movement that results in the making of *Out-ing Mahari: Sculptural Fragments*. In my journey, historical mediation of the *Mahari* in my embodied motility combines with the accentuation of the *Mahari* in digital mediation to realize the intermodal construction of embodiment. I conclude by postulating the generative role of history in the reception of new media.⁶⁶

In the next section, I argue for the possibility of accessing the somatic dimension in the live *Odissi* dancing body only via a detour in technological mediation that allows for the gestural decomposition from the linguistic infrastructure of the Indian classical canon. A discussion on the co-construction of

⁶⁶ Ann Cooper Albright does a similar exercise of reading the motion capture technological domain using her historical investigation of American modern dance.

embodiment across the live and the mediated—both enlivening the *Mahari* motility—ensues to contest the rhetoric of disembodiment around the reception of new media (Hayles 5). Then, I portray the material instantiation of the *Mahari* in my collaboration with Conroy where the uncanny overlapping between my habitual, choreographic, and technical (*Odissi* and 3D animation) quirks with the digitally mediated blurs the boundaries between live, technological, and historical mediation.

BREAK-AWAY FROM THE TEXTUAL CANON

In this section, I describe the making and reception of *Iteration I*, an interdisciplinary activity braiding *Odissi* choreography, 3D animation, and Butler's theory of performativity.⁶⁷ In this experiment, I explore the relationship between movement and language as they manifest in the digital environment. I follow Judith Butler's strategy of linking performance and language, using gesture in her discussion of Brechtian theater. *Iteration I* investigates the means of breaking away from the textual infrastructure of *Odissi*. Live and digitally mediated movement interact with one another to break from *Odissi's* textual canon. To begin my experimentation at the cusp of choreography and animation, I find myself interested to explore the multiple ways the 3D environment can

⁶⁷ In *Iterations II* and *III*, I focus on the physical traces of the moving body. In this experiment, I explore the relationship between movement and language. I follow Judith Butler's strategy of linking performance and language using gesture.

possibly communicate information. I ask: How can gesture communicate without referring to its textual codifications? How can traditional *Mudras* break away from their textual postulations while retaining their communicative quality? How can contextual information in the 3D environment further the communicability of gesture?

To find answers to these questions, I design a methodology combining choreography and digital mediation. My first encounter with mediation begins at the studio where I choreograph a solo sequence inspired by *Mahari* performativity for its subsequent translation as data via motion capture technology. In my choreography, I incorporate⁶⁸ the signatory performative characteristics of the *Mahari*, namely full-bodied motion, non-representational gesturing, personalized expression, serpentine pathways, deep S-curves, as delineated in previous chapters. I capture this variation of the material through my first of a subsequent series of motion capture sessions. The movement captured by the twelve camera Vicon motion capture system as calibrated onto a skeletal system obscures my flesh in totality. It loses my face, fingers, and toes. What remains is a skeletal structure with my movement data plotted to it. This movement draws attention to the full-bodied motions of my dancing body as opposed to *Odissi's* concentration

⁶⁸ I use 'incorporate' the way Hayles uses it to demonstrate the embodied characteristics such as the hand-wave of a 'good-bye' gesture. This gesture requires the medium of the human body for its instantiation as opposed to its inscribed trace on paper that loses the embodiment of the former. I expand upon this notion in my next section.

of gesture at the peripheral limits while maintaining my choreographic quirks as well as my habitual motions. My solo choreographic exploration and its subsequent motion capture mediation access the holistic movements of the *Mahari* as I continue surfacing her in my amateur experimentation with animation as described below.

I scour through the Autodesk Character Generator to design an appropriate model for *Iteration I* in which my motion captured movement animates the movement of the digital avatar. *Avatar* in animation is a 3D model that has a real-world referent. I experiment with multiple digital avatars before choosing the appropriate model for *Iteration I* as I am curious to see the landing of this movement on an anthropomorphic figure. I play with multiple anthropomorphic 3D models from the inbuilt options available in the software before selecting the final one. I settle for brown skin and black hair color. Curious to see my movement in a male body, I choose a South Asian male figure since it is close to my cultural heritage. Without the option of South Asian costuming choices,⁶⁹ I go with the generic black shirt and black pants. This choice of costuming enables citation of the process of capturing since during the motion capture session, I wear a black jacket and black pants. Here, I primarily focus on developing the

⁶⁹ Certain South Asian male costumes are *Dhoti* (a large piece of fabric folded in between the legs), *Kurta* (a shirt-like piece of garment usually until the knees), and *Churidar* (pants with pleats near the ankles).

performative qualities, energies, and characteristics of the *Mahari* and looking for their translation from my dancing body to the computer-generated avatar. I have grown in the *Odissi* repertoire by performing and re-performing the famous *Das Avatar* or the ten incarnations of Hindu male deity *Visnu*. However, in this animation, I decenter the male-centricity in the notion of avatar in *Odissi*. In *Iteration I*, I juxtapose the male avatar with my movement that is a performative meditation on the *Mahari* establishing her as the central feature in my dancing *Odissi* body.

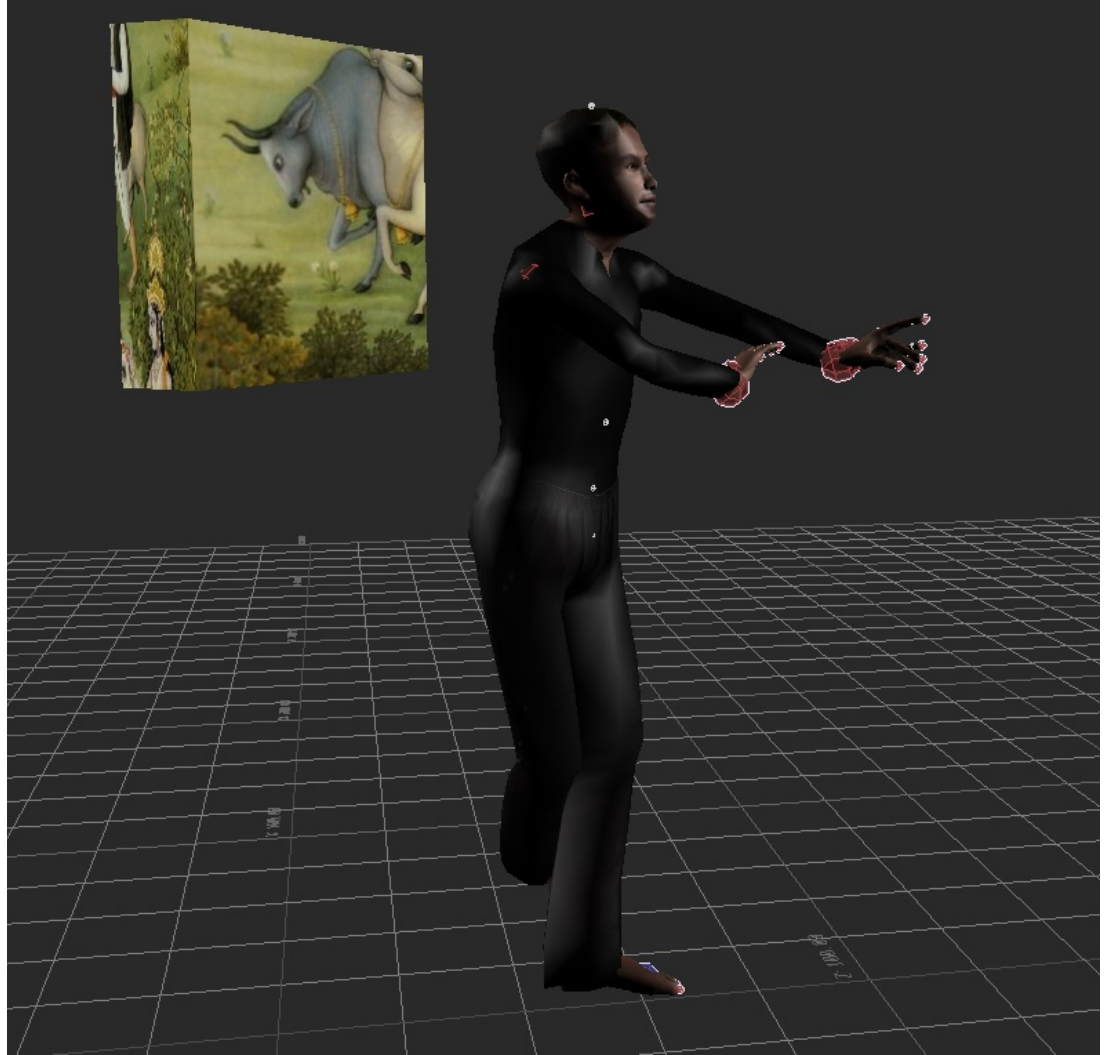


Fig 4. Misplaced Representation of a Cow supported by the 3D picture. Screen Shot.

The digital environment allows for the reorientation of the traditional foundation of gestural infrastructure in *Odissi*. I align the 3D skeletal capture of my movement onto the skeletal rig of the male avatar transmitting my movement

from the initial skeletal rig to that of the avatar. Further, I add gestural information onto the 3D model. My skeletal rig does not have any fingers since the capturing process obscures all my gestural information. But, the avatar has manipulable fingers to which I manually add gestures. This addition of gestures breaks away from the usual flow of motion within the dancing *Odissi* body even though it looks seamless in the 3D animation. I alter the usual implementations of gestures in *Odissi* by computationally choreographing them in bizarre ways that are completely out of context when compared to their traditional usage. For example, in place of the usual motif of a woman (*Tamrachuda*), I show a gesture for a cow (*Simhamukha*); in a usual expression of joy (*Alapadma*), I show conflict (*Arala*). I use key-frame animation to allow the hands to take on the gesture marking a starting point and an ending point with the gesture taking place in between those two temporal intervals. There are two separate instances that introduce breaks from *Odissi* gesture. One, by intentionally using *Mudras* out of context, the visual reception and legibility of *Iteration I* clashes with traditional gestural use. Two, the ascription of gestures in the computing environment marks a decisive break from the somatic body. This break seeks to fracture the linguistic nature of the *Odissi Mudra* and its placement in the sequence to enhance the narrative appeal. By reorienting the gesture in a different modality, key frame animations govern these *Mudras* in absurd play on their narrative meanings.

The process of gesturing in this 3D animation environment differs from my habitual treatment of *Mudras* in *Odissi* dance. In *Odissi*, the gesture is as important as the gesturing, that is, the handling of the gesture. The coming in and getting out of the gesture adds grace to the overall tenor of *Odissi* movement. In *Given to Dance*, the *Mahari* dances with minimal gestures and her gestures were also staccato unlike the flowy quality of the gesturing *Odissi Mudra*. The digital manipulability of *Iteration I* allows me to juxtapose the minimal staccato gesturing characteristic of the *Mahari* onto my *Odissi* movement digitized as 3D data. This mode of introducing gestural information plays with an unconventional, non-codified, and non-textual deployment of *Mudras* in the motion captured *Odissi* movement reminiscing the traces of the *Mahari* body.

I use Butler's idea of the citational break of gesture to understand the performative meaning of *Iteration I*. Butler argues that in order to be efficacious, gesture draws from a social and linguistic infrastructure. Butler recognizes the citational character of gesture that repeats what has come before and is supported by an existing linguistic infrastructure. For example, the act of waving the hand for gesturing 'good-bye' requires the prior acceptance of its deployment for legibility. This gesture, while drawing its efficacy from its citationality and given infrastructure, also has the potential to break away from its conventional deployment. Butler finds such a break in gestural deployment in Brechtian theatre

where she notes that the citational break decomposes the linguistic gesture. Following Butler's citational decomposition of gesture in western theatrical performance, I show the possibility of the digitized body to access the somatic dimensions of the historical *Mahari* via a decomposition of canonical gestures of the classical Indian aesthetic vocabulary. The linguistic citations of the classical and Orientalist gestures question the ease of reading embodiment in live dancing. In this backdrop, I create *Iteration I* by experimenting with the motion captured data of my choreography that loses my finger data causing a literal break from the linguistic signification via *Mudras* or hand gestures. I manually animate the fingers of the 3D model in articulations of *Mudras*. *Mudras* surface in the 3D model after undergoing a break from my physical body and its linguistic *Odissi Mudras*. This strategy decomposes the textual relationality of my *Odissi* body and the decomposition of the canonical convention enables the gesture to gain performative efficacy in the digital domain.

Butler's connection between the gesture and its linguistic translation is pertinent to the textual codifications of the *Mudras* since each *Mudra* comes with an array of uses as defined in the *Sanskrit* verses of *Abhinaya Darpana*. For example, *Pataka* can refer to the sacrificial pit, rainfall, night-time, river, wind, direction, breaking, sleeping, anger, pacifying, negating, and agreeing among others. At a single time, *Mudras* can possibly provide an array of linguistic

referents. But its deployment in *Odissi* colors the reception of the dancing body as a textual exegesis. The movement becomes secondary to its discursive codification.

Butler's citational break becomes crucial to deployment of gesture in *Iteration I*. Here, I computationally choreograph gestures in ways that undermine the textual canon. I use an absurdity alongside bringing in the staccato, minimal, and personalized gesturing by the *Mahari* to surface one of the historically marginalized modalities of deploying gesture. In addition, I inlay pictures within the 3D sphere to further punctuate the textual communications of the *Mudras*. These pictures add contextual information and colors the 3D environment for the 3D model. The images do not bear any one-to-one correspondence with the gestures used. They are associated with the *Mahari* ritual practice as well as her own interpretations of her practice. According to Amrapalli *Mahari*, her practice recreates the childhood play of *Krishna* in *Vrindavana* where he and the *Gopis* (cow maidens) danced and sang in a divine play of exuberance and joy (Apffel-Marglin *Wives of the God* 98). The *Mahari* ritual singing of the *Gitagovinda* also portrays this scene of merriment. Infusing images that refer to the ambient feel of *Mahari* ritual practice, I further interrupt the textual codifications of the gestures in the visual reception of *Iteration I*.

The gestural deployment by *Iteration I* simultaneously cites as well as breaks away from the textualized classical Indian canon by contesting *Odissi's* peripheral readability of gestures through the full-bodied reception of the *Mahari*. This decomposition aligns with Butler's definition of gesture, which is a "truncated form of action that has lost its established intelligibility."⁷⁰ While theorizing the performative function of Brecht's epic theater, Butler argues that the gesture in performance becomes graspable only in its historical decontextualization through a break or a rupture.⁷¹ Dance-scholar Uttara Asha Coorlawala draws from Abhinavagupta's *Rasa* theory draws connection between the theories of reception in the *Natyasastra* and Brechtian theatrical conventions. She claims that every performance includes the audience's re-reading and re-writing upon the dancer's body. Following Coorlawala, I treat my 3D model as the result of my re-reading. Contrary to Butler, I propose that in *Iteration I*, gesture decontextualizes from the discursive body of Indian classical aesthetics but undoes a historical error by aligning itself with the marginalized historical figure of the *Mahari*. History has a constitutive role in my project that enables a *different* reading of the hypercodified gesticulation of the Indian classical body.

⁷⁰ In "When Gesture Becomes Event," Butler shows the citational quality of gesture.

⁷¹ Dance-scholar Uttara Asha Coorlawala draws from Abhinavagupta's *Rasa* theory or the theory of emotional aesthetics, to find similarities between the theories of audience reception in the *Natyasastra* and Brechtian theatrical conventions. She claims that every performance includes the audience's re-reading and re-writing upon the dancer's body. Following Coorlawala's suggestion, here I treat my 3D model as the effect of my re-reading.

Butler argues that the citational process has a constitutive outside through which it alters at the moment of its repetition (*Bodies That Matter* 34). In her discussion of drag performance, Butler finds such a constitutive outside that causes ruptures in the exact repetition and replication of gender binaries. The linguistic decontextualization and the historical recontextualization of *Iteration I* makes it possible for the *Mahari* to maintain *Odissi*'s constitutive outside with the potential to alter the meaning of gestural deployment at the moment of its usage. *Iteration I*'s citing of the gestural vocabulary permeated through the performative qualities of the *Mahari* establish the *Mahari* as *Odissi*'s constitutive outside that potentially alters the meaning-making processes within the contemporary dancing body through mediation. Although, the citation of the *Mudras* connects the 3D animation environment to the Indian classical canon, the decontextualized and non-linear deployment of these classical aesthetics discards the classical harmony proposed by the ancient texts. In fact, the citation of the gestures breaks away from the linguistic dependence of *Odissi* by citing the embodied deployment of these gestures by the *Mahari*.

Founding her critique on Derridean deconstruction, Butler's critique materializes that which it cites. The author finds the somatic component of the gesture by positioning it in between language and performance. Non-linear narrativity, argues South Asian scholar Devesh Soneji, aligns with the dancing

tradition of the temple-dancers. The classical turn converted this non-linearity into linear story-telling that Soneji ascribes as a later addition for purposes of textual readability. Hence, the performative decomposition of gesture in *Iteration I* cites as well as breaks away from the linguistic infrastructure while connecting my movement to the performative qualities of the temple-dancer by breaking away from *Odissi's* gestural canon. Beyond gesture, the performative deployment of the *Mahari* in motion capture creates a dual impulse. It cites the *Mudras* as well as breaks away from their originary textual context. In this citational break, it materializes connections to the historical embodiment of the *Mahari*.

The citational break of the gesturing process within *Iteration I* is performative of the somatic dimension possible within my movement, if and only if, it is drenched with *Mahari* performativity. Butler defines performativity as the quality of a performance which “intervenes upon and transforms a space, that it seems to exercise its own agency and effect.” She seeks performativity within the organic dimensions of oratory, vocalization, and breathing in speech,⁷² and I further this by locating the *Mahari* performance in my organic movements—neck deflections, head tilts, chin lifts, elbow bends, knee flexes, torso twirls, heel strikes, and hip curves—in the computer-generated 3D male model’s execution of

⁷² Butler analyzes performance studies scholar J. L. Austin’s speech-acts that are utterances that do something in the real world. She argues that in order for speech-acts to function, they need to have a citational quality that draws upon this social infrastructure in order to function. For example, proclaiming *I do* denotes the citational nature of marriage.

my movement. Yet, these minute movements fail to transcend the *Odissi* body since each of these motions have a corresponding textual vocabulary that supports it. *Odissi's* verbal jargon animates my embodiment of these technical quirks and their on-screen mediation.

I notice a difference between these motions and my usual deployments of them in my *Odissi* body for reasons that are unrelated to one another. One, these motions are painstakingly produced only after deliberating on the citational full-bodied characteristics of the *Mahari*. The full-bodied motility of *Iteration I* results partly from my choreographic manipulations of my *Odissi* body and partly by my unconventional gestural deployment in *Motionbuilder*. Hence, the digital mediation holds that difference between that of *Odissi* and *Mahari* movements at the center. Two, situated in the backdrop of ambient images, the 3D male avatar performs the codified gestures using hands, neck, head, eyes, spine, torso, and hips, only after breaking away from the textual canon. The first translates my intention into the digital medium, while the second reflects the scope of the mediated environment to manipulate the intended meaning.

The reorientation within the digital medium of the prior linguistic communication of my *Odissi* movement to the performative non-linguistic *Mahari* gesturing creates the scope for the reembodiment of the *Mahari* in my movement practice, which in turn, infuses a somatic dimension to my textually

overdetermined *Odissi* movement. Although, the gesturing operates within the citational chain of *Sanskritized* aesthetics animating the legacy of the classical canon, my embodied movement finds a connection to the full-bodied *Mahari* motility by repurposing the linguistic canon through citational decomposition. Even though it draws upon the ancient texts, it breaks with the contexts of these manuscripts. It introduces somatic noise initiated by the somatic dimensions of my body filtered through its digitized manipulations in the *Motionbuilder* software. The gesturing calls upon the powerful linguistic infrastructure of the classical canon, but that it breaks free from this ideological hold to nurture connections with the historically marginalized. I argue that *Iteration I*'s gesturing imbued with the somatic markers of the *Mahari* infuses embodiment in my *Odissi* movement that is otherwise textually overdetermined and hypercodified. I echo dance and technology scholar Douglas Rosenberg's theory of recorporealization in which he argues that the interactions between the dancer with her technological mediation recorporealizes her dancing body with the technical citations. Incorporating the visual analysis of *Iteration I* in my body, I punctuate my hypercodified linguistic gestures in *Odissi* with the *somatic* gesturing of the *Mahari* encoded with the technological markers of 3D digital animation. I exceed the verbal proscriptions of the gestural sign language infusing the somatic

embodiment of the *Mahari* at the juxtaposition of my live and technologically abstracted, manipulated, and animated movement.

EMBODIED INCORPORATIONS OF THE MAHARI

In this section, I will elaborate upon the co-creation of embodiment at the juxtaposition of studio and computational practices. The digital medium affords me the possibility of juxtaposing my motion with the performative gesturing of the *Mahari*. *Iteration I* makes a decisive break from the textual vocabulary of the *Odissi* body. The gestural deployment in the animation influences my movement since it applies a different logic of gesturing than that ascribed within the *Odissi* vocabulary. This experience of making *Iteration I* nuances my choreographic emanation of the *Mahari* in the studio as I incorporate my learning from animation in my movement to generate material for subsequent digital iterations. At the core of this remains the citational break of the *Mahari* gesture that decomposes the textual codifications of the *Odissi* vocabulary but here I focus on the serpentine gestures of the physical movements of the *Mahari*.

I create *Iteration II* and *III*, to further my investigation of the contentious distinction between peripheral and full-bodied gesticulation of *Odissi* and *Mahari* bodies respectively. I continue reflecting on the embodied movements of the *Mahari* in the technological mediation of my dancing body by articulating the spatial trajectory of my spine, hands, feet, head, and hips. *Iteration II* focuses on

the spine and its S-curves running vertically through the mediated figure. *Iteration III* creates a 3D visual trace of the movement of the hands, feet, head, and hips. Both the iterations surface the qualities, composition, and the execution of the serpentine gestures of the *Mahari* in the digital domain. While the first momentarily draws the S-curves of the undulating spine, the second creates a permanent mark on screen with the body trails. I ask: How can I explicitly document the S-curve of the *Mahari*? How can I break it down to understand its initiation, execution, and culmination? What is the relationship between full-bodied and peripheral motion and their impact on the central vertical alignment of the dancing body?

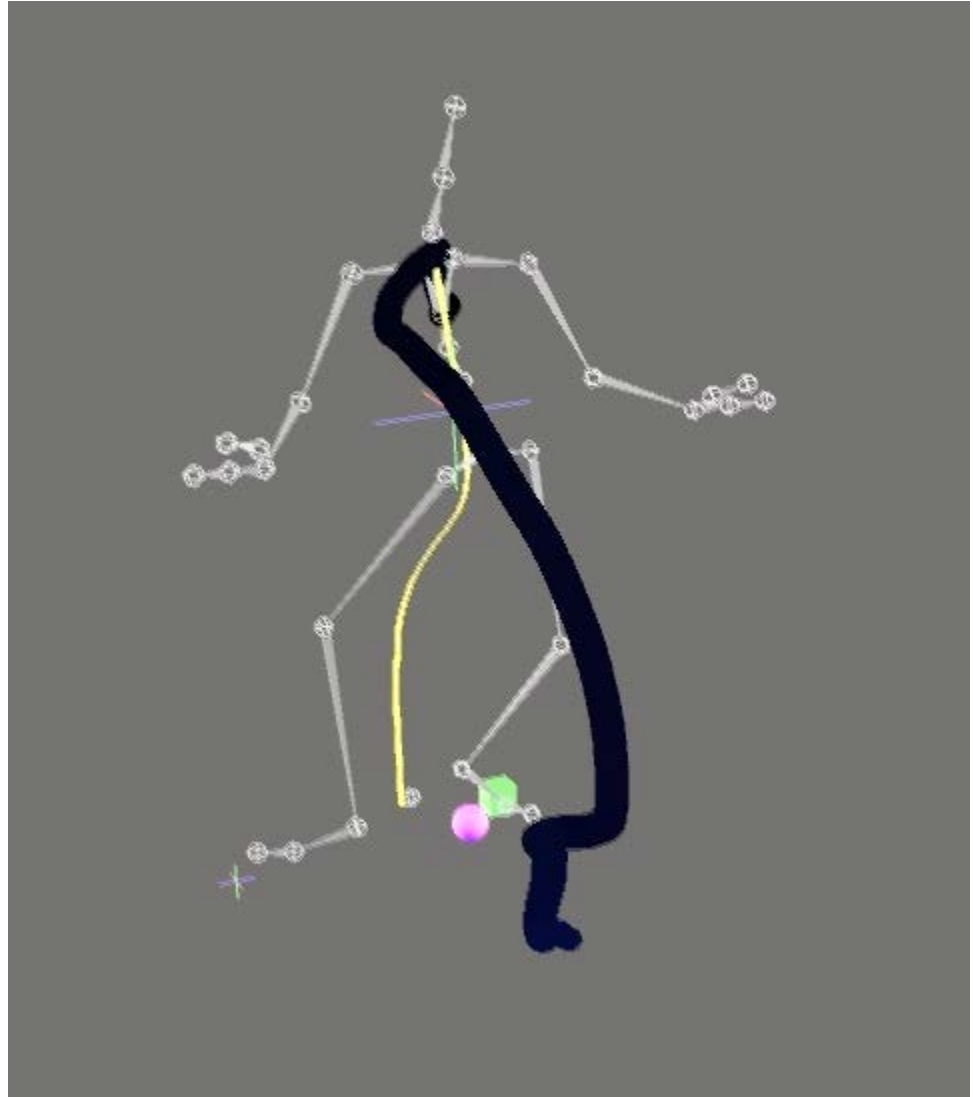


Fig 5. Visualization of the S-curve. Screen Shot.

In *Iteration II*, I work with the 3D skeletal calibration of my motion capture data that provides an analytical framework since it enables me to trace the spatial travels of my motion in the three-dimensional medium. It pares down my movement to its bare bones, losing the muscles, face, fingers, toes, and skin,

alongside the seductive eye expressions and the alluring smile of my *Odissi* movement. In its erasures, this medium channels focus on the physicality of the dancing body by deviating concentration from the process of meaning-making at the periphery of the *Odissi* body—in the codified hand gestures, expressive facial expressions, and rhythmic footwork. The three-dimensional perspective of the *Motionbuilder* software presents a holistic perspective to analyze motion. The 3D world reorients the focus away from frontal 2D presentation of my *Odissi* body. I attach a trailing ribbon of black ink to my spine to trace its pathways in space. I attach a cube and a sphere to the center of my pelvic girdle and the base of my neck respectively. When the two superimpose, the spine maintains an upright posture. When they are offset, the body shows varying degrees of curvature. When the body is upright, the S-curve vanishes into a straight line. As I move, I leave a solid black trail moving up and down in spiral motions that leave overlapping arcs with varying radii. With the turn of the upper torso towards the right, feet rooted parallel onto the ground, I notice a tiny spiraling trace around the spine. The torso orients and reorients itself with respect to the 3D space in quick successions mostly isolating from the hips that maintain a slightly different orientation from the chest area; a maneuver that initiates the curvilinear aesthetic. Cloudlike patterns permeate the 3D space around the spinal column that navigates in swirling motion spiraling one way and the other in sustained beginnings and

spiraling endings. In this way, *Iteration II* transposes the twisting aesthetics of the *Meena-Danda* to the spatial movements in the 3D space.

In my analysis, I find that this 3D visualization of my *Odissi* movement also highlights the organization of the head, torso, pelvis, and the knees with respect to each other. The body rests in *Abhanga*, a standing pose in *Odissi* where one leg bears the entire body weight while the other foot stays parallel to the supporting leg planted at hip distance apart. The hips bulge slightly to the side of the weight-bearing leg. The knees in pli   create a hollow in the back of the legs, a detail lost in the concertized *Odissi* performance given that we wear baggy pants obscuring the exact contours of the legs. If viewed from the front, the concavity of the spine complements the convexity of the knees while the curvature flips when viewed from the back as the convexity of the ribs support the concavity of the knees. A two-dimensional view does not support the curvature of the pelvis. Viewing in 3D rotation surfaces the S-shape in a three-dimensional formulation where the knees, the torso, and the pelvis complement the winding shape obtained by the skeletal figure. This shape stays completely hidden in the two-dimensional viewing experience of live performance or even video recording. The invisible meandering curves organizing my bones, features prominently in the course of the 3D rendition of my movement.

Iteration II emotionally connects me to the *Mahari* as I centralize the narrative of loss in the skeletal mediation of my *Odissi* movement, which when performed in its conventional *Odissi*-ized version erases the rhetoric of loss.⁷³ Devoid of flesh, my skeletal body foregrounds the historical loss that is the foundational basis of my *Odissi* movement. The narrative of loss given the loss of facial and ornamental expressivity animates *Iteration II*. Further, *Iteration II*'s repeated up and down motion of the sternum, side-to-side torso movements, and subtle neck isolations as one in anxious search and discomfort foreground the expressive possibility of the body that is otherwise encoded in the facial expressivity in conventional *Odissi* movement. I find the motion captured movement loaded with emotions despite the shedding of the usual signifiers of emotions, which are principally, the face and the hand gestures, by the skeletal medium. The absence of face and hands in the motion capture environment do not preclude the generation and reception of emotion. I recognize the emotional quotient of the digitized skeletal body as melancholic and anxious, through these demonstrations having embodied access to these motions. I find it very emotional to see the rising and falling motion of the sternum, the subtle orientations of the neck, and the full-body orientations of the mediated skeleton.

⁷³ Even the *Odissi* dancers' ornamental recreations of the *Mahari* only presuppose this utopic *Mahari* body relevant to the contemporary concert stage for her devotion to *Jagannath*. Celebrating the devotional *Mahari* body erases the historical marginalization and violence incurred by the historical *Mahari*.

Locating emotion in the physical body within a technologically mediated context is familiar in the Odishan context where temple-sculpture communicates emotions often without deploying the expressive faculties of the face. South Asian dance studies expert, Kapila Vatsayan tells us that the sculptor, “through the placing of the feet, the movement of the hip, the deflection of the torso, the slight bends of the neck suggest certain states of mind, without depending upon facial expression” (30). Hence, my viewing experience remains emotional and does not transcend to the universalizing tendency of the *Sanskrit* aesthetics that codify, discipline, and spiritualize the *Odissi* dancing body. As an emotional connection with my dance-ancestor, I see the *Mahari* corpo-realize in the emotive bellowing movement of the skeletal sternum as the body comes in and out of the S-curves in varying depths, curvatures, and intensities.

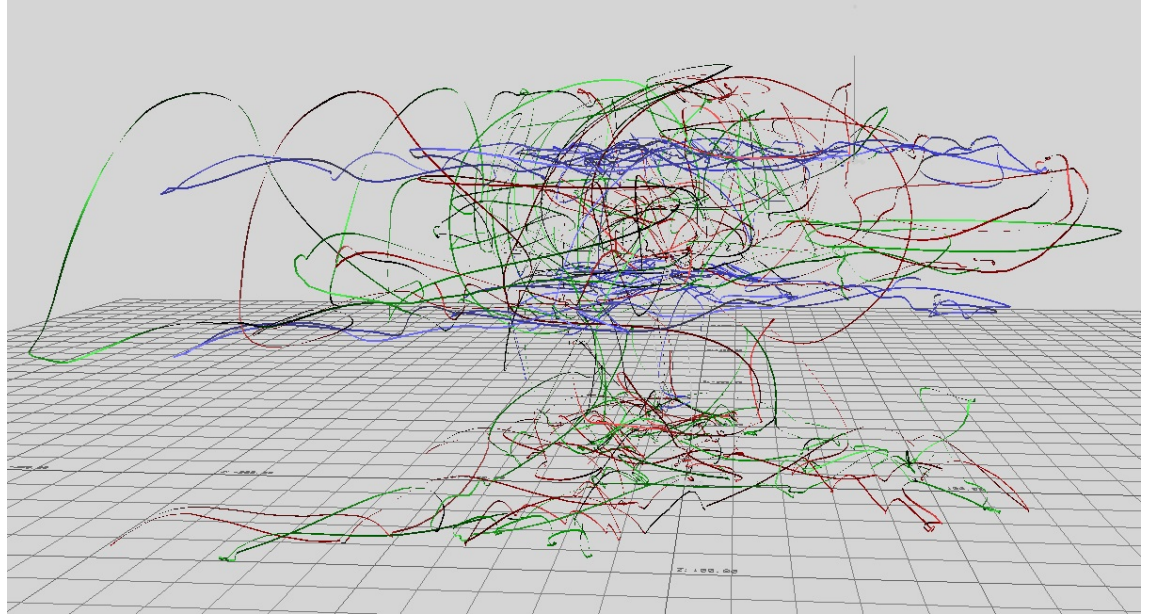


Fig. 6. Body Trails from the Front in the Shape of a Banyan Tree. Screen Shot.

While *Iteration II* focuses exclusively on the serpentine curves within the body, *Iteration III* maps spatio-temporal characteristics. *Iteration III* captures the entire choreography in a single image. This experiment presents the broad performative qualities of *Mahari* movement as translated digitally. In this iteration, I map the spatial trajectory of this phrase associating multiple colors with the different parts of the body in *Maya*.⁷⁴ I use blue for tracing the movement of the head and the hips. I use green for the right wrist and the right ankle and red for the left wrist and the left ankle. A 2D viewing of the picture from the front has the appearance of a giant banyan tree having a dense concentration of roots and

⁷⁴ I make these traces under the guidance and mentorship of my motion capture instructor, Vitalya Berezin-Blackburn in an independent study in Fall 2016.

branches while standing tall with a firm stem. The 2D view shows how the body is always held upright and the footwork and the hand gestures are the most common features. The winding nature of the wrist trails correspond to the curvilinear spatial trajectories by the gestural movements. Unlike the hands, the feet make sharper angles and with a high concentration.

The color mapping suggests a high density of the footwork. The green and the red combine in asymmetrical patterns showing the asymmetry of the right and left halves of the dancing body. Individual movements do not necessarily have right and left repetitions. The ankles remain mostly closer to the ground except certain exceptions when we see the right foot raised to the knee level and the curling of the green shows the spin on the standing left foot. The proximity of the trails to the floor show that the feet rarely leave the ground except for the one-legged balances that rarely feature the duration of the piece. There are multiple variations in the traces left by the feet given the multiplicity in footwork—stomps, spins, jumps, brushes, grazes, and hits—each leaving a different mark. The closer the feet to the ground, the higher is the density of movement.

The rest of the body continues surfacing the S-curves that become clear by understanding the exact relationship between the knees, head, hip, and hands. We see only one green line emerging from the ground to the knee level showing clearly the one-legged balance in one instance. The head and the hip align with

each other a few times as evidenced by the blue markings running along the vertical alignment from the root to the stem of the banyan tree. But mostly, the head lags the hip by milliseconds. Also, the head has slightly more movement than the hips as its arc has greater degrees of undulating waves unlike that of the hips. The hand movements garner the most attention with their curvy trajectories. The ribbons appear the most beautiful in this situation as each hand is never symmetrical but present such similar patterns due to their similar curvy movements. In summary, these body trails capture the curvilinear trajectory defining the *Mahari* aesthetic.

The mediation of my solo choreography incorporating *Mahari* performativity results in a dense conglomeration of winding and spiral curves at every part of the body, although the upright stance of my movement denotes the presence of a strong central core. The *Odissi* dancing body usually maintains a magnetic core in its upright stance relegating the peripheral gestural movements to a secondary status. The stability of the core, I have shown in “*Mahari* in Ritual,” is constantly policed, regulated, managed, and reinforced, in the name of *Odissi* technique in order to distance *Odissi* from the *Mahari*. In my choreography, I challenge this strength by infusing a softer and curvier possibility. This lifts the curving traces of the *Meena-Danda* from the floor to the body as the vertical spinal column generates similar spiraling curves. The hands

incorporate the serpentine motility of the *Mahari* as well, hence, lifting the motion from the feet grazing on the floor. The hands concentrate on creating serpentine motion using the full-arm as opposed to the concentration of peripheral gesticulation in conventional *Odissi*. I note in the 3D ecosystem that the *Meena-Danda* transposes in a different plane projecting the embodied performativity of the *Mahari* and contesting and conversing with the technical dictates of my *Odissi* movement and its digital mediation.

There are two strands at work in these two computational visualizations of my movement: the choreographic and the technological. The choreographic is my attempt to surface the *Mahari* in my *Odissi* body and its subsequent encapsulation as motion captured 3D data. The other strand, the technological is my experimentation with this data in order to exaggerate the aesthetics of the *Mahari*. It is important to note, that despite my choreographic and technological attempts to restrict the pernicious technicalities of the *Odissi* movement, the restraint of the stable *Odissi* core continues to feature in *Iterations II* and *III*. The banyan tree like image of *Iteration III* shows the centrality of the firm core in my *Odissi* movement. Although I work to eliminate my training, it oozes out from within the pores of my body given the twenty-five years of my habitual practice such as within the isolations between upper and lower body. In any case, I find this exercise generative in ways that it brings back the *Mahari* in discussion regarding

the construction of the dancing *Odissi* body. Surfaced in the digital domain, the *Mahari* finds an embodied manifestation that was long suppressed by the textual and puritanical injunctions of my *Odissi* body. The digitized and the corporeal mash up together to create space for revisiting a historical error. There is no clear line between the digital and the corporeal given the digital is an exhibition of my movement. The digital domain inscribes my embodied *Odissi* with the aesthetics of the historical *Mahari*. Movement is constructed as a recursive loop between *Odissi* and the *Mahari* while incorporating the technical injunctions of 3D animation. Animation, in turn, is influenced by my embodiment as well as the somatic dimension of the *Mahari* where I resort to Hayles's call to put back the flesh into the technological domain. Hayles does so by envisioning inscription and incorporation alongside body and embodiment as co-creating the human condition. She finds the body and inscription as normalized and abstract operating as a system of disembodied signs while embodiment and incorporation maintain connections with the instantiated medium. She conceptualizes the bimodalities of body-embodiment and inscription-incorporation as "two sine waves moving at different frequencies and with different periods of repetition" (198).

Given the uncanny similarity between the Hayles's sinusoidal curves and the *Mahari Meena-Danda*, I argue that the choreographic and the technological function as Hayles' sinusoidal patterns through which the *Meena-Danda* emerges

as the *Mahari*'s incorporating practice. Although the movement has been deployed by the *Odissi* dance, it has not been named yet, which leaves the opportunity for me to deconstruct the *Odissi* embodiment to bring forth the *Mahari*. Given she always already traversed multiple mediums (sculpture, dance, and ritual) with their concomitant technologies, the choreographic and the technological commingle to liberate the intermodal and polyvalent *Mahari* in an aesthetic adaptation of her embodied twists.

UNCANNY EMBODIMENT IN DIGITAL MEDIATION

Meena-Danda-ing through the ornate pillars reminiscing the pillars in the Natamandira (dancing hall) of the Konarak temple of Odisha, emerges a ghostly apparition as if entering the dancing hall to present a dance routine. At this point, the figure has no flesh and bones. It is built out of several glowing markers organized as a human figure. The broken parts of a female sculptural body are piled up in one corner. Cracked torsos, misplaced heads, and separated limbs stack up in a heap of sculptural fragments. As the Meena-Danda continues, these fragments attach to the moving body one by one. At the end, we see a female stone sculpture with missing parts who starts dancing to my choreographed movement. She dances in between the stone pillars of the Natamandira and eventually leaves after the completion of my routine. The screen goes back to dark.

Here, I describe the final experiment for digitally surfacing the *Mahari* in which I collaborate with Steve Conroy to produce *Out-ing Mahari: Sculptural Fragments*. First, I incorporate the choreographic and the technological sinusoidal braiding discovered in my earlier iterations into my studio practice by softening my core and transposing the *Meena-Danda* to my spine, hands, and neck. Second, I perform another iteration of my *Mahari* in a final motion capture session. Third, together with Steven Conroy, I use the data from this motion capture session to develop explicit conventions with the movements of the historical *Mahari* and their sculptural remnants of Odisha.

Set in the backdrop of the *Natamandira*, or the dancing hall, and drawing inspiration from that of *Konarak* temple, *Out-ing Mahari: Sculptural Fragments* starts with a small light source lighting the broken fragments of the sculptural *Alasa-Kanyas*. The light source starts moving and illuminating the surrounding pillars of the *Natamandira*. Eventually the single light source multiples to a number of loosely held light markers organized in an anthropomorphic figure. It looks like a ghostly body given the lack of both bones and flesh. The apparition enters the space deploying the *Meena-Danda*.

The ghostly body reaches a mound of broken sculptural fragments of a female *Alasa-Kanya* in the form of her head, hands, torso, knees, calves, elbows, hips, and face. The flickering body bends and thrusts its hand into the pile of

stone remnants. As it retracts its hand, the stone fragment clings onto its hand. It repeats this process to substitute the light markers for stone fragments. In this way, the body of markers is slowly substituted by all the broken sculptural fragments creating a 3D avatar reminiscing the *Alasa-Kanya* only through the concept of its remnants in stone. The model loosely holds together the broken pieces of stone sculpture emulating the different body-parts. The pieces are strung together in the form of the *Alasa-Kanya* perhaps invoking the *Alasa-Kanyas* from the pillared walls of the *Natamandira* from Konarak temple. The result is not a solid body. It is an apparition and a conglomeration of loosely joint fragments. Each fragment connects with the whole with a gentle touch, bobbling on the body and making its boundaries porous and illimitable.

After attaching all the different body parts, the 3D avatar moves to my digitally rigged motion. Just as the *Natamandira* in the Konarak temple remains the sole receptacle of the embodied traces of the *Mahari*, the digitized *Natamandira* follows its real-life precedent in reel-life.

Conroy and I work for nearly a year on this project juxtaposing the sculptural *Alasa-Kanya* with the historical *Mahari*. Through weekly meetings, we co-construct the final rendition in the series of my visualizations of the *Mahari*. Given the temple connections of the *Mahari*, we start our journey by emulating sculptural figures for our 3D modeling. Conroy creates the image of the final 3D

model after consulting my pictures from my fieldwork. We start with the graceful and languorous *Alasa-Kanyas* as well as strong and powerful goddesses called *Saktis* given that the *Mahari* is mythically related to both the benign *Alasa-Kanyas* and the dangerous *Saktis*. Conroy takes particular interest in the ornamental details of these sculptures using *Mudbox* and *Maya* to work specifically on these ornamentations. He captures the brokenness of these sculptural images along with their stone textures in his 3D modeling using displacement maps in *Mudbox*.

Both he and I were unsatisfied with the final version of the figure because it represented neither the sculptural nor the historical accurately. Instead of completely scrapping our collaborative creative of the model, we decided to repurpose the model in a way that is a more accurate depiction of the historical and the sculptural. What already works is the way this model is raising the *Mahari* from sculptural, historical, embodied, digital, and theoretical fragments. We settle on the idea of the sculptural fragment to better align with my project that combines the choreographic and the technological to partially render the visualization of the *Mahari*. Conroy's computational skills and creativity in enlivening the sculptural and the historical result in a 3D animation sequence built in *Maya*, *Mudbox*, and *Motionbuilder*. Importantly, movement transpires into Conroy's computational exposition through its experiential encounter with his

embodied vocabulary as in our weekly meetings, he practices and perfects the *Meena-Danda*. Conroy embodies the *Meena-Danda* in order to understand the mechanics in the dancing body to then translate the twisting motion to the hips and torso of his 3D model. Thus, the choreographic was the central determining condition punctuating Conroy's technological processes at every stage of the production. By using my video recorded motion as a durable record to inform, compare, and color the generic walk cycles, back bends, spinal twists, and knee bends of the digital avatar in the 3D animation environment, Conroy lets the choreographic influence his character animation.

The embodied traces of the *Mahari* manifest in this digital culmination of the architectural, choreographic, and the sculptural. The 3D environment recreates the architectural layout of the Konarak temple. The *Natamandira* in the Sun Temple in Konarak bears the traces of the *Mahari* in the coarseness of its stone floors and in the sculpted figures of dancers on its pillars. The *Natamandira* built in the thirteenth century, is a pillared hall built on top of a raised platform having four monumental stairways. Both the platform as well as the pillars are covered with sculptures of Hindu male and female deities along with musicians and dancers. Religious studies scholar, Prabhat Mukherjee, notes the presence of the dancers in the Sun temple in Multan since the seventh century as recorded by the Chinese traveler, Hiuen Tsang (49). King Narasimha I, who built the *Konarak*

Sun temple, belonged to the *Ganga* dynasty also known for their patronage of temple-dancers. Although there is no written evidence suggesting the presence of the *Maharis* in the Konarak Sun temple, archaeologist Thomas Eugene Donaldson in his three-volume compendium on Odishan sculpture called *Hindu Temple Art of Orissa*, argues for the presence of a temple-dancing community affiliated to the *Natamandira* (423).

Given this history, one may conjecture that the *Maharis* performed in the *Natamandira*. They might have taken instructions from their Guru Sadananda Gupta who is mentioned in an inscription on one of the stone pillars. And, they possibly traversed the spaces in between the four pillars using the *Meena-Danda*. Donaldson notes that the opulence of the temple-program gestures towards the abundance of the Hindu royal patronage to the arts of dance and sculpture. Even though, the *Mahari* used to be the benefactor of such abundance, today, she is only traceable in the ruins. In *Out-ing Mahari: Sculptural Fragments*, the fragments of the sculptural *Alasa-Kanyas* embody these sculptural ruins.

In addition to the architectural and sculptural connections, the choreographic citations of the *Mahari* in my movement animate these stone fragments where references are made to the *Meena-Danda* of the historical *Mahari* and to the choreographic variant of the *Alasa-Kanyas*. But the conversion of my choreographed gesture to its digital manifestation is mediated by Conroy's

computational manipulations and vice versa. While framing the development of the ghostly figure in *Out-ing Mahari: Sculptural Fragments*, Conroy first uses a generic walk cycle and a standard act of bending over. But, to give it a more choreographic appeal, I record myself emulating the motion of the model and qualifying it by a more *Mahari*-esque motility. I imagine walking through the stone pillars of the *Natamandira* to abruptly encounter the stone fragments and bend my knees to maintain the upright upper body as I dig my hands into the imaginary stone fragments. Thus, the choreographic forms the through line in this collaboration punctuating the digital at various junctures.

In the animation sequence, *Out-ing Mahari: Sculptural Fragments*, I find myself split between my *Odissi* and my *Mahari* selves—a phenomenon that brings together digital mediation, embodiment, and historicity in the same visual economy. Here, choreographic visualization braids together citations from the historical *Mahari* body through my choreographic quirks and their digitized positioning and manipulating. It repurposes my embodiment questioning my status as both the subject and the object of the sensorial functions. I recognize the habitual idiosyncrasies of my dancing body, while failing to recognize the complete dissolution, fragmentation, digital manipulation, and 3D environmental features grounding my movement in a volition outside of my embodied self. The rift between my embodied movement and my technological self on screen moving

to formalities within *Odissi* although permeated through the embodiment of the *Mahari*, I argue, presents an uncanny embodiment, an embodiment that is both embodied as well as disembodied. Literary theorist Nicholas Royle borrows from Freud's famous text "The Uncanny" to define uncanny as finding the self only at the point of a split with itself. There is a dual coding inbuilt in the sense of the uncanny that can never attain a sense of certainty about the exact causation regarding the intention given the self is continually being split and strained. Referring to Freud's classical text, Kriss Ravetto-Biagoli, in "The Digital Uncanny and Ghost Effects," defines the relevance of the split of the self in the digital domain as he argues that "rather than hinging on an individual's internalization of affect or emotional intensity, the digital uncanny exemplifies an irresolvable uncertainty as to whether or not those very affects and intensities amount to predesigned responses or programmed gestures triggered by various forms of algorithmically generated media stimulation."⁷⁵ Confounding differences between the human *Odissi*, the digital visualization, and the historical *Mahari*, this strange encounter blurs the binary understanding of technology and traditional practice as futuristic and historical respectively. Uncoupling movement from bodies, the uncanny embodiment of the *Mahari's* visualization blurs

⁷⁵ Reiterating *Odissi* scholar Ratna Roy's characterization of *Mahari* performance as a covert *Tantric* ritual in an overt *Vaishnavite* program, surfacing the *Mahari* within the *Odissi* body then relates to this Freudian exercise of the uncanny, that is something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light.

historicity and representation; the historical emerges within the technological and the represented history marginalizes the present claiming its rightful position at the center of embodiment.

My *Meena-Danda* remains as a central serpentine pattern that blends the creation, sequence, and patterning of movement on one end and its digital translation and setting on the other in realizing the visualization. But, while my embodied choices provide one dimension in this experiment, my collaborative encounters with Conroy shape the signatory representation of the *Mahari* in the digital space. In the digital space, the *Mahari* emerges in her fragmented reality as noticed on the walls of the *Konarak* temple where many of the *Alasa-Kanya* sculptures have lost their ornamental details due to wear and tear over the years. He unleashes the mythological historicity of the *Mahari* in his technological maneuvering of my movement by imbuing his digital artifacts with the *Meena-Danda*. The patterned movements embedded with the serpentine-nature of the *Mahari* meet Conroy's digital patterning blending historicity, mythology, sculptural textures, and technological assumptions (such as the loss of facial expressions). Through this uncanny rendering, I emancipate the *Mahari* in my movement that is not yet again overdetermined by the technical apparatus of *Odissi*.

My mediated dancing body brings to the fore the *Mahari*'s historical lineage through her sculptural and kinesthetic dimensions. In fact, my embodiment in the technological domain accentuating the *Mahari* bears the historical attributes of the temple-dancer. This technological maneuver of emancipating the *Mahari* in the uncanny embodiment of the 3D screen, though does not dissipate the historical violence perpetrated on the *Mahari* body, hopes to bring back the body within Indian classical dance through the acknowledgement of the artistic lineage of its historical practitioner. Cognizant of her abstract spatial patterns and the soulful emotionality within a fragmented representation of a 3D avatar, the choreographic visualization complicates the originary textual meaning that the *Odissi* body claims to transmit by highlighting the historical and sculptural traces often in direct retaliation of the textual beginning. Complexity evolves in the technical domain through recursive processes of experimentation, such as data cleaning, creating avatars, encoding the environment, and fragmenting the 3D model. The *Mahari* embodiment formulates through these seriated processes and keeps pushing at the disembodiment of the *Odissi* body in a field of noisy, misaligned, but intersecting sinusoidal curves representing the choreographic and the technological.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Throughout my dissertation, I search for the historical *Mahari* in my twenty-five years of *Odissi* practice by exploring theoretical and historical connections and developing new relationships to and manifestations of the *Mahari* through choreography and digital mediation. I start by exploring the originary site of *Mahari* dancing in the Hindu temples of Odisha. Eventually, I transpose the performative qualities of the historically contextualized ritual *Mahari* to creative enactments for choreographic and mediated outcomes. Positioning my work in the field of Practice as Research (PaR) where the practice itself becomes the focus of investigation, my project is also deeply informed and contextualized through an interdisciplinary theoretical lens combining religious studies, critical cultural theory, sexuality studies, technology studies, dance studies, and South Asian studies. To establish connections between contemporary *Odissi* performance and the historical *Mahari*, I imbricate poststructuralist theories of deconstruction in my practice in the studio, Odishan temples, and computer laboratories. I discover and theorize the artistic lineage of the *Mahari* in ritual, choreography, and 3D animation.

In this creative engagement with historical practice, I have asked, what is the artistic potential of the historically forgotten *Mahari*? Unlike others, I refuse to dismiss the dancing skills of the *Mahari* and I formulate ways to invoke the

performative gestures of *Mahari* dancing. There are two ways I revive the embodied artistry of the historical temple-dancer. First, I allow her to surface from within existing *Odissi* repertoire by acknowledging her movement influences (*Meena-Danda* or fish-walk, *Tri Bhanga* or S-curve) that have otherwise been attributed to the *Odissi* choreographers. Second, inspired by her performative gestures emanating from within her ritual performance as well as her architectural and sculptural connections to Odishan temples, I allow for the creative reenactment of the *Mahari*. In this way, I do not reify the historical *Mahari* in a style or in ornamental associations as previous scholars have. Instead, I find subversive potential in the ever-elusive and the multivalent possibility of the *Mahari*. Given the sexually transgressive, queer, and uncanny possibilities of *Mahari* embodiment in this interdisciplinary investigation, the *Mahari* constitutes the deconstructive epicenter within *Odissi* with the potential to nudge, disrupt, and subvert the patriarchal center enjoyed by the male Hindu deity or *Jagannath*.

Odissi dance appropriates *Mahari* ritual performance in order to establish itself as a devotional archetype. In my dance practice, there are clear traces of these ritual foundations that connect my body directly with the movement of the *Mahari*. This is a subject that is yet to be addressed in scholarship on *Odissi*. As I address this gap, I suggest that the *Mahari* redefines the religious center of Odisha generally ascribed to *Jagannath* through her ritual performance to her divine

consort. I show that the movement deployed by the *Mahari* during the temple rituals is significant for reimagining the religious definitional construct of *Mahari* dancing. Her dance is no longer merely representing the *Tantric* ritual sexual intercourse or *Maithuna*. Instead, *Mahari* dancing overcomes the *Tantric* construct by pushing beyond the definitions of *Tantra* itself. This way, it expands the boundaries of religious practice by realizing the significance and potential of movement. Centering a historically marginalized female practice through its contemporary surfacing in the *Odissi* body potentially decenters the patriarchal gestures of contemporary *Odissi* supplicating to *Jagannath*.

I further investigate the embodied associations of the *Mahari* by looking deeply into *Mahari* movement and its specificities in choreography. With my cast at Kenyon College, I create a group piece choreographically emanating the *Mahari*. In the final stage of this creative investigation, I choreograph a solo motion capture animation to discover the *Mahari* via digital representation. Using choreography as a method, I distance myself from the movement to surface the *Mahari* at the center. I make sure other ancillary elements such as, musical choices, costuming, and lighting further accentuate the full-bodied, serpentine, and twisting motility of the *Mahari*. Choreography allows me to position the historical, mythical, ritual, and sculptural *Mahari* at the center and dissolves my

agency in the performance in a way to hopefully undo and potentially complicate the historical appropriation of *Odissi* over the *Mahari* tradition.

I show that digital mediation of South Asian dance practices allows for a contextual, historical, embodied, and cultural interpretation of motion capture technology while extending the relevance, purpose, and significance of a historical performance tradition in contemporary practice. My movement as 3D data reorients the narrative, textual, and expressive focus of the ornamented *Odissi* dancing body towards the physical movements of a computer-generated skeletal figure as I visualize the quintessential *Odissi* twist that mediates from *Mahari* to *Odissi*. By finding citations of *Mahari* embodiment in the 3D formulation of my movement, I counter disembodied interpretations of the digital sphere and extend her reach into a new century. Technological manipulations repurpose my embodied movement in multiple ways that are inconceivable in my dancing body to begin with allowing for the uncanny spectral emergence of the *Mahari*.

In order to search for the citational injunctions of the *Mahari*, I deploy a plethora of theoretical, practical, methodological, and technological techniques to bring out the *Mahari* from within *Odissi*. In my praxis, I imbricate my *Odissi* practice with South Asian aesthetic and philosophical principles alongside critical cultural theory across sexuality studies and digital humanities. Specifically, I draw

from South Asian philosophies of transgression, queer theory, poststructuralist theories of deconstruction, and theories of technological mediation to theorize the kinesthetic embodiment of the *Mahari*. I use dance improvisation techniques to deconstruct my movement practice in the studio. I play with the tension of my *Odissi* training and its implicit and unacknowledged mediation of the *Mahari* in choreography and digital mediation. I describe my multimodal approach spanning studio practice, fieldwork in Odishan temples, choreography, and digital explorations to surface the *Mahari* body.

This investigation is a creative interpretation of a historical performance tradition and it will continue to feed into my future research in cultural, pedagogical, choreographic, and digital realms. Given the focus on the *Mahari*, I have chosen to set aside the historical and contemporary experiences of the *Gotipua*. Next, I intend to execute an ethnographic investigation on the *Gotipuas* of contemporary Odisha who navigate the urban and rural centers of performance alongside mainstream *Odissi*. For a better understanding of the social positioning of the *Mahari*, it is necessary to engage with a deep consideration of caste, a hierarchical system ranked on the purity/pollution principle of human nature stratifying individuals into occupations according to their birth (Gupta; Panini; Dupont). Apffel-Marglin argues that the *Mahari* fell outside of the rules of purity and pollution in the ordinary caste system in Odisha given her exceptional status

as ritually auspicious for the Hindu life-world (*Wives of the God King* 232).

Anurima Banerji notes that the *Mahari* tradition could navigate the ritual service of *Jagannath* that was strictly restricted to higher caste men (“Dance and the Distributed Body” 30). In an interview with dance-scholar Rahul Acharya, Sashimani Devi, states “it was a norm to choose either Brahmin, Karana, or Khandayat girls” for temple-service. However, scholars studying the temple-dancing tradition in other parts of India have pointed out how lower caste women were made sexually available to upper caste men (Omvedt; Vijaisri). This sexual exploitation of lower castes was widespread and the primary reason why they were humiliated in this hierarchical system (Tambe 86). In the feudal-religious order in Odisha too, the *Mahari* was expected to bed with multiple men (Pattnaik 85). Given the widespread and implicit functioning of caste hierarchy in the Indian society, future research into how the *Mahari* tradition nestled within the extant caste structure will enable a deeper understanding of the differential power relations between the *Mahari* and the wider social infrastructure.

In addition to a better understanding of the socio-cultural scope of the *Mahari* tradition, I think there remains to discover the full potential of the *Mahari* in choreography. During my interview, Sarat Kumar Das belonging to the family of Ratna Prabha *Mahari*, mentioned that he is in possession of multiple poems written by the *Maharis*, some of which he has successfully choreographed in the

Mahari style, including *Natapasara* written by Dunguri *Mahari*.⁷⁶ I have only skimmed the surface of the process of choreographic excavation of the *Mahari* in my solo and group works and look forward to building a body in this area. In my future PaR investigations, I want to reconstruct *Mahari* performance by choreographing to her written text among other projects.

I am interested in interdisciplinary investigations of religious studies and technology studies finding their moments of intersection and departure. In this work, the *Tantric* sculptural manual of Odisha called *Silpa Prakasa* has provided me written descriptions of the *Alasa-Kanyas* which have influenced my experiments with choreography and visualization. Religious studies expert, Loriliai Biernacki argues for the importance of the notion of visualization in visualizing the secret feminine principle within abstract geometric drawings symbolizing the cosmic worldview in the sculptural manual of Odisha called *Silpa Prakasa*. For me, choreographic visualization finds prominence in the context of digital mediation as a philosophical grounding and conceptual framework of connecting to the *Mahari*. In the future, I want to theorize visualization via a comparative understanding of *Tantra* and digital mediation. I want to further my inter-modal inquiry of technology that in my project happens

⁷⁶ Apart from their choreographic potential, these works should also be analyzed for their literary content.

to support a wide range of techniques ranging from dance technique, stone sculpture, and motion capture mediation.

Most importantly, this work is a corrective measure for the historical marginalization of the temple-dancer in the field of Indian performing arts via an interdisciplinary inquiry. Combining religion, performing arts, technology, and critical theory, this interdisciplinary research expands the understanding of embodied movement practice of an arts practitioner as producing and mediating new and historical knowledge respectively. The range of art forms I analyze, namely, temple-sculpture, concert dance practice and choreography, historical ritual performance, and digital visualization of my motion captured movement, and the spectrum of disciplines informing my theoretical and methodological underpinnings, position my research as an interdisciplinary task where each of the separate strands braid together in movement. In my creative reconstruction of the *Mahari* in praxis, the *Mahari* gestures from the ruins of medieval Indian temples to a future—a future where her embodied historicity and performativity are periodically invoked, ritually celebrated, and socially respected—a future in which religion, technology, and theory dance in and through the *Mahari Meena-Danda*.

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Appendix A: List of Durable Documents

Introduction to the Online Compendium

Mahari in Ritual

PaR Outcome:

Meena-Danda (2017): Video Documentation of Live Solo Performance

PaR Process:

Evidence of Studio Practice (2 Videos and 2 Journal Entries)

Embodied Meditations on *Mahari* Pure Dance

Embodied Meditations on *Mahari* Expressional Dance

Historical Sources (3 Screen Shots)

Stills of *Mahari* Dancing from the documentary film *Given to*

Dance

Key Performative Sources (5 Videos)

Morning Ritual *Mahari* and *Pallavi-Batu* in *Odissi*

Sujata Mohapatra performing *Hamsadhwani Pallavi*

Sujata Mohapatra performing *Batu*

Evening Ritual *Mahari* and *Gitagovinda Abhinaya* in *Odissi*

Kelucharan Mohapatra

Madhavi Mudgal

Visnu Tattva Das

Mahari-Odissi Relationality (4 Videos)

Hip-Torso Isolation in *Odissi* technique

Odissi Chaukas and *Tri Bhangas*

Mahari style of *Odissi*

Kasturi Patnaik

Suhag Nalini Das

Rupasree Mohapatra

Mahari in Choreography

PaR Outcome:

Alasa-Kanya: Sculpture in Odissi (2016): Video Documentation of Live Group Performance

PaR Process:

Solo Studio Improvisations (16 Images and Corresponding Process Descriptions)

Choreographic Prompts from Sculpture

Rehearsal with Cast (2 Images and 1 Video)

Sculptural Motifs in Movement

Rehearsal Video
 Feedback
 Stills from Concert Performance (7 Images)
 Democratizing *Krishna*
 Abstract and Meaningful Gesticulation
 Reconstructing the *Mardala* (drumming) and *Sukasarika* (talking
 to a parrot)
 Bringing Back the Sculptural Darpana
 Exaggerated Torso Movements
 Krishna Supplicating to Radha
 Dancing with Drums
Bahirangan, An Informal Performance (1 Video)
 An informal Presentation of *Alasa-Kanya: Sculpture in Odissi*

Mahari in Mediation
 PaR Outcome:
Out-ing Mahari: Sculptural Fragments (2017): 2D Video Rendering of a 3D
 Animation Sequence
 PaR Process:
 Solo Choreographic Investigation for Motion Capture (Journal and 13
 Sketches)
 Summarizing the Improvisatory Deconstruction
 Dance to Data (2 Videos and 8 images)
 Full Body Capture
 Facial Capture
 Skeletal Calibration from Live Dancing to 3D data
 Data Cleaning
 Iterations I, II, & III (3 Videos, 3 Journal Entries, and 4 Images)
 Making of Iteration I
 Making of Iteration II
 Making of Iteration III
 Collaboration with Steve Conroy (4 Videos, 1 Pencil Sketch, and 10
 Images)
 Exchanging Products
 Designing the 3D Model based on Sculpture
 Designing the 3D Environment based on the Temple Dancing Hall
 Sculptural Fragments
 Walk Cycle on the *Mahari Meena-Danda*

Appendix B: List of Supplemental Files

PaR Outcomes

MeenaDanda
AlasaKanya
OutingMahari

Creative Articulations Process (CAP)

CAPReflections
Opening
Situating
Delving
Raising
Anatomizing
Outwarding

Ritual

MahariChauka
SentientMahari
RupashreeMohapatraMahari
SuhagNaliniDasMahari

Choreography

AlasaCAP
CamaraCAP
DalamalikaCAP
Darpana
DarpanaCAP
Gesture
GunthanaCAP
KetakibharanaCAP
Krishna
ManiniCAP
Mardala
MardalaCAP
MatrmurtiCAP
MugdhaCAP
NarthakiCAP
NupurapadukaCAP
PadmagandhaCAP
Radha
Sukasarika
SukasarikaCAP

ToranaCAP
Torso
VinyasaCAP
Mediation
3DInspirations
3DModel
3DModelFragments
3DEnvironment
FacialCapture
FCurves
IterationI
IterationII
IterationIII
Mocap1
Mocap2
StoneTexture