

Towards a Global Community

To speak about bodies is first and foremost to explore the ways in which bodies move.

—Erin Manning, *The Politics of Touch*

How and when the Indian considered the body as an essential prerequisite for transcending the body constitutes a total history of Indian thought.

—Kapila Vatsayan, *Traditional Indian Theatre*

Towards the end of my anthropological fieldwork for this project, I interviewed respected author and dance critic Leela Venkataraman to ask about the future of odissi dance.¹ As we sat in the lobby of the India International Centre in New Delhi, surrounded by leafy Lodhi Gardens, she said:

More and more people will learn odissi, there is no question. I have a feeling that people who dance outside [India] will know very little of either the Odia language or the Odia poetry. They are going to associate the dance form with just the movements and nothing else. I think it's only the technique that is going to become more and more popular. The form and the content, I think they are going to split.²

Here I was in the middle of conducting my research, excited by new directions traversed by odissi dancers worldwide, when her remarks squelched my enthusiasm. Was it because I didn't believe form and content could be so easily divorced from one another, and because oftentimes form *is* content? Or did my discomfort

proceed from the part of her comment that privileged the geographical context of Odisha over others, thus cutting against the core of my study of a global community? Or was it for more personal reasons because I was one of “them”—dancers who now live and perform outside India? Obviously, there were several perspectives to unpack in her comments. First, Venkataraman makes a clear distinction between the form and the content of odissi dance, where “form” refers to technique. Second, she is of the view that odissi dancers, especially those outside India, will think of odissi just as the frame without the essence, that they will learn and perform the technique and/or form without an understanding of the content and without awareness of the context from which it emerges. For her, the latter is exhibited by the language or poetry of Odisha, dimensions she believes are integral to the dance form. And her remarks, while not explicit, seem to perpetuate a well-worn argument that dancers outside India are not as authentic as their homegrown counterparts—a narrative I heard often during my fieldwork and chafed against as a global practitioner of the form. While I did not agree with her, I was also unable to shrug off her comments. I too had seen several odissi performances in the US choreographed to Bollywood or Western music. These performances ranged from highly creative productions to less polished versions. The ones that were less effective were not so because they were performed outside India or to non-Odia music, but because the dancers appeared less experienced. I had also seen odissi dancers in Odisha, replete with regional context, performing with sloppy technique that did little justice to the rigor and grace of the form. I knew that the simple binary of form versus content set up by Venkataraman did not tell a complete story.

Yet, I could not ignore her comments. Venkataraman’s assertions are extremely relevant in light of the commodification of “world dance.” Her concerns alert us to the dangers of dance performed outside its “original” context and how certain aspects of non-Western forms have been cherry-picked and appropriated in the West as “world dance” (Savigliano 2009), and indigenous and regional specificities have been reduced to dance notation but mostly have been erased by regularization of movement (Foster 2009). In writing this manuscript, and unpacking Venkataraman’s comments, it is increasingly clear that these knotty questions are tethered to equally knotty answers. This book is an attempt to untangle some of these questions and answers, and their corresponding points of attachment. For example, the above-mentioned concern of the split between form and content may actually reflect an anxiety over a lack of authenticity seeping into odissi dance. This book not only engages with the question I posed to the critic about odissi’s future but proceeds with an understanding that odissi’s future is deeply tied to odissi’s past. I also ask other related questions, such as what notion of “tradition(s)” guides these movement practices, and how are they being recreated in a global context? How do odissi dancers engage with an embodied practice that has its roots in a ritual form and is now performed

nationally and transnationally? How does the performance of odissi, originally a regional dance form from Odisha called *Odra Magadha* (first or second century BCE)³ reify, or perhaps challenge notions of national identity and complicate discourses of diversity in India and abroad? How does choreographic innovation take place within a dance form that is celebrated for its antiquity? Further, how do these dancers deal with Indian dance being a “religious/spiritual” form of expression, and a marker of “essential” Indian identity, in a neoliberal context? Finally, what embodiment of the form will enable the evolution of the art as opposed to its atrophy? Many of these questions are not limited to odissi dance but pertain to other Indian classical dance forms as well, and they continue to be debated in academic writing.

Taking all these questions into account, this book focuses on odissi dance that is deeply anchored in *both* form and content, and in work that breaks new ground. These are works that may or may not use Odia poetry yet capture the poetry and geometry of the form; works that may or may not have been created within the regional boundaries of Odisha yet build on its richness of language, complexity, nuance, and rigor. In this book, I argue that the form and content of odissi, along with its context, have *always* been in dynamic engagement with one another, and the story of odissi and the dancers in this ethnography provides varying refractions of this engagement. Although the regional context may shift, these dancers create new contexts. And whether dancers perform Krishna-Radha stories and enact mythological demons, or use the form to focus on transnational feminist issues, odissi is grounded by the geometry and the undulations of the dancing body that carries its own context and creates it anew.

Odissi: The Form

What is the form of odissi? How does it feel to dance odissi? Odissi is made up of two basic positions, *chowka* (square) and *tribhanga* (three bends). *Chowka* is a symmetrical, solid stance, rooted to the ground in a deep knee bend formation. The weight is equally distributed on two feet, with heels (placed half a foot-length apart) pointed towards each other and toes pointed out to the sides. The arms, held out to the sides at shoulder height, are bent at ninety degrees at the elbow to form a square, with fingers together and pointing forward. The back is straight, head and eyes forward, pelvis dropped towards the ground, and abdominal muscles engaged. After a few minutes of being stationary in this position, the thighs start to cramp, the arms tire, and the lower back aches as sweat begins to form along the spine. In the first basic exercise of lifting and placing one foot then the other, the act of transferring the weight from foot to foot brings sweet but momentary relief. All told, the practice and training of odissi is extremely strenuous and taxes the body. I discuss the *sadhana* (practice) in more detail in Chapter 2.

Tribhanga involves the three bends of the neck, torso, and knee and is, unlike *chowka*, an asymmetrical stance. The majority of weight is on one leg while the other leg is free to move. The weighted leg must be stolid and provide balance for the rest of the dancing body. The *tribhanga* position is often described as creating a gentle “S” shape with the body. In both *chowka* and *tribhanga*, the torso undulates from left to right, but not in a straight line. The torso traces a small and gentle arc upwards over the belly button to the right and back while the hips remain stationary. Generally, the gaze follows the hands, and if the hands are in a static position they follow the arc of the torso.

The odissi dancer moves continually and fluidly between these two basic stances of *chowka* and *tribhanga*, adding a multitude of permutations, which involve feet, hands, eyes, torso, arms, jumps, turns, and leg movements. The dancing of odissi contains an inherent paradox: the bent legs provide a strong base; at the same time, this groundedness is essential for the freedom and graceful fluidity of the upper body. Performed skillfully, the dancer moves languidly while the hard work of the legs goes unseen. The practice of the dance accentuates the hips with the uneven weight shifts in *tribhanga* and the arcing undulation of the torso. Visiting Odisha, it is possible to see how such movement originated in a coastal and tropical state where the humidity envelops one for most of the year and movement is often slow and deliberate. Moreover, the temple sculptures that odissi lays claim to celebrate the generous curve of the hips and the roundedness of the breast.

The codification of many Indian classical dance forms, including odissi, as I discuss in detail later, involved a removal of the eroticism of the dance in response to critical colonial writings. Despite this erasure, the form of odissi with its languid, circular movements is inherently sensual; even the *chaali* (walk) on and off stage is rounded, with the torso making a figure eight, and is rarely executed traveling in a straight line. The circularity of odissi’s form and directionality is accomplished by using pivots, arcs, and spirals in the body. If a dancer is to walk starting on her right, she will lift her right leg, place the right heel down near the left toes, and pivot from left to right rotating her body on the heel. As her right toes arc open to the right, her torso traces an arc up and over from left to right, and spirals so that the left shoulder comes forward. Jagannath, the temple deity for whom this dance was originally performed, gives us many clues for odissi’s stances and movements. *Chowka* is similar to his square stance as depicted in clay. The emphasis on roundedness in odissi can be traced to the all-seeing eyes of Jagannath, circles of black, surrounded by white and outlined in red believed to symbolize infinity. *Tribhanga* is most commonly associated with the stance of Krishna, weighted to one side, languidly playing his flute.

Bodies, Bells, and Borders

Featured prominently in Michael Jackson's 1991 "Black or White" video is a female odissi dancer.⁴ Performing at a busy traffic intersection, Yamuna Sangarasivam performs with Michael Jackson to the lyrics:

They print my message
In the Saturday Sun
I had to tell them
I ain't second to none

And I told about equality
An' it's true
Either you're wrong
Or you're right

But, if you're thinkin'
about my baby
It don't matter if you're
black or white.

The odissi dancer performing is one of many "world performers" in the video, showcased between American Indians dancing outdoors amidst gunfire and horses, and Russian performers moving in front of the Kremlin beneath swirling



Figure 0.1. Still from Michael Jackson's 1991 "Black or White" video.

snowflakes. The twenty-two seconds of the odissi sequence feature Sangarasivam with Jackson on a traffic island as cars zip by, in front and behind them.

This particular segment culminates in a perfectly timed spin for both and a look of mutual exchange. Sangarasivam holds up a *darpan* or mirror, a classic odissi pose often associated with Radha as she dresses for her secret tryst with Krishna. The song became the best-selling single of 1991, and shortly after Jackson's death in 2010 the video was recirculated on the odissi yahoo group. This was not the only odissi cameo in global pop music; in 1998, several years after the initial release of "Black or White," Madonna performed alongside the California-based Patnaik sisters at the MTV awards. Trained in odissi, Laboni (20), Shibani (17), and Shalini (16) choreographed and performed odissi in its traditional idiom, alongside the famous pop star. Moving to a more literary instantiation, the young Kashmiri village girl, Boonyi, featured in celebrated novelist Salman Rushdie's 2005 novel *Shalimar the Clown*, at the behest of the visiting US ambassador, is to take odissi classes with a legendary guru as a way to inculcate in her the training and sensuality associated with the dance form (Hejmadi 2010). While these appearances in music videos of well-known pop stars and in the work of world-renowned novelists legitimize odissi in some ways, they also place the dance form on a buffet table of multiculturalism to perpetuate an image of an unchanging and traditional, yet highly visual and sensual dance form. These cameo appearances of odissi dance are helpful to contextualize the dance within a global economy; but as tempting as it might be to conduct an analysis of these glimpses, they are not the focus of this study. Instead I am interested in odissi dancers who are at the forefront of the story, who are choreographing work, and changing the form to push it in new directions, and to give the reader a glimpse beyond the *darpan* or mirror that is held up for us.

A March 2005 issue of *India Today* (International Edition), a magazine that claims a global readership in excess of fifteen million, has on its cover three Indian dancers. These dancers are from Ananya Dance Theatre, a Minneapolis-based dance company working on an odissi-derived production. They are, however, a departure from the odissi dancers who typically represent this dance form, and who often adorn posters advertising Indian tourism. The 2006 "Incredible India" tourism advertising campaign uses odissi dancers in several images, especially dancers with winsome expressions, sculpted poses, colorful silk costumes, and elaborate silver jewelry. By contrast, the dancers on the cover of the *India Today* magazine are dressed in cotton saris wrapped over black leotards, their disheveled hair untied to the waist, red *sindhoo* powder smeared across their hands and foreheads, and their expressions bold and fierce. The cover story, entitled "Para Troupers," seems to comment on this departure, suggesting an odissi avant-garde, of dancers trouping across borders.

The article goes on to explain how these dancers are reworking "classical" Indian dance forms (such as odissi) for a global audience. While the image on

the magazine cover and the accompanying article address new forms of Indian classical dance, the coverage remains a sensationalized depiction by mainstream media. By contrast, the ethnographic and theoretical study in the present work builds on the history of odissi dance and its transformation from a ritual in a sacralized space to a transnational performance in the public sphere.

Odissi's story is one of postcolonial India, a tale of the struggle around tradition, gender, class, caste, regionalism, nationalism, and globalism. As one of eight Indian "classical" dance forms, odissi's compelling narrative takes place at the intersection of colonial discourse, nationalist historiographies, and regional identities. Although archaeological evidence traces it to the second century BCE, odissi was officially codified in 1958 by a group of odissi dancers and scholars who came together to reconstruct the dance,⁵ a fact elided in most narratives that invoke a seamless trajectory back to antiquity.

In 1991, with the beginning of neoliberal reform and a consolidation of a middle class economy and identity in India, odissi emerged on the national and global stage in a way that is different to its prior heyday. India's increased interaction with global capital over the last few decades has been viewed by some as a threat to national identity (Oza 2006: 2). With the desire to preserve a "national" heritage in mind, dancers sometimes rely on an essentialized notion of "Hindu culture" to forward the form of odissi; others challenge nationalist discourse through politically inspired expressions and performances. These varied claims to "Indianness" by a wide array of odissi dancers are often politically deployed and can embody a range of meanings, from alienation from the homeland to a conflation of "Hindu" culture with right-wing Hindutva ideologies. As the debate about India as the next "superpower" continues,⁶ sites of performance have become increasingly crucial locations of study, especially as the interplay between globalization and nationalism occupies cultural sites with often competing agendas. Consequently, this study of odissi dance is not only an expression of a "local culture" or "tradition," but one that conceptualizes the dance form as a politicized genre—a dance that renders itself amenable to different ideological usages and contestations. Based on ethnographic material and historical analysis within this socio-economic landscape I show that for many of these dancers the "performing body" is not only a site of aesthetic expression, but also one that manifests myriad positionalities of gender, class, and region as it traverses multiple borders and subjective notions of belonging.

Framing the Dance

Painting in broad strokes, Dipesh Chakrabarty describes an epistemological split present in the "fault line central to modern European social thought." On the one hand, there exists a hermeneutic tradition, best represented by Heidegger, that produces "affective histories"; on the other hand, there is the analytic tradition of Marx that tries to "demystify ideology" (Chakrabarty 2000: 18). Using

these two schools of thought in his discussion of South Asian political modernity, Chakrabarty attempts to bring both intellectual traditions into the same conversation. Like him, I try to find a balance between these two trajectories of social thought and bring them into dialogue with one another. Within the hermeneutic tradition, I study the “affective” history of odissi by paying attention to the diversity of local identities of gender, geography, and class of these practicing odissi dancers to ask questions such as: how does this community of dancers create and imbue meaning into their daily lives? What does odissi, and the practice of it, mean to them, and how is it enacted? What are the specificities and contradictions in this practice and performance? This study is also placed within a Marxist analytic tradition of looking at how the ideologies of nationalism and neoliberalism govern the ways in which these dancers are able to dance. For example, how do neoliberal economies in India affect the professional and artistic choices these dancers make? How has odissi’s presence on a global stage changed its practice and performance? By placing this study between these two approaches and keeping a balance between these two different frameworks of social thought, I am able to look at the dancer as both a participant in a global economic framework and one who creates a particular place of belonging for herself. To that end, I approach this study as a dancer on stage looking out, and use two distinct Sanskrit terms that describe different facets of seeing: *drishti* and *darsan*. These terms function as both conceptual and bodily anchors in my work as a dancer and scholar.

I use the term *drishti* to describe my study of the affective histories of odissi as described above. *Drishti* loosely translates as a “focused gaze” or a gaze of intentionality, an awareness of the body in space. The act of *drishti* is not merely looking; it is the physical act of seeing. For dancers, *drishti* is paramount—the dancer’s direct gaze signals an intentionality of movement. In odissi, the dancer’s *drishti* most often follows her hand movements, but can also be the gaze of the character she is performing. If she dances as Radha, as she hears enchanting flute music she gazes in the direction of Krishna with her own *drishti*. Thus she also directs the audience’s gaze to see Krishna’s mythic presence through her *drishti*. The yoga and meditation practitioner also uses her *drishti* to pick a fixed point in space to develop concentration or keep balance. We tend to think of seeing as a cognitive function, “as a disembodied, beam like ‘gaze’” (Csordas 1994: 138). But we can also conceptualize visual attention as a “turning towards”; the phenomenological idea of “paying attention *with* one’s body” rather than simply looking is helpful in deepening our understanding of *drishti*. This project, too, is not simply about gazing or looking but looking as an intentional, bodily act, a looking by which we pay attention with our bodies.

In the practice of dance training, *drishti* can also be understood as developing a keen sense of body awareness. The dancer becomes aware of how her body “feels” in performing movement as well as how it feels moving in space,

a skill that is crucial for a performer. Using mirrors during dance practice can be helpful in self-correcting and perfecting movement, but it can also prevent a performer from fully developing a sensorial awareness of their body. It can become a crutch that is not available during performance, when *drishti* is essential. In a parallel fashion, I use *drishti* in my research and writing; as a way to keep our conceptual gaze clear and intent, yet soft to allow for multiple ways of seeing, and to keep focused on the dance and the body of the dancer, focused on “turning towards” the intimate detail. The “mirror” in my research is akin to narratives of odissi dance that see odissi in a singular dimension. These “mirror” narratives, while helpful in my research and the formation of my argument, are incomplete without the sensorial awareness of the dancer in space.

Similarly, *darsan* is intimately connected to the practice and cultural context of odissi, and is a term I use to describe the analytical categories used in this study. *Darsan* means “sight”—beholding in a spiritual context, an intentional viewing of a deity, such as in a temple, as well as the broader notion of visual perception of the divine. In Hinduism, the clay deity represents the divine and its eyes are typically the last feature to be fashioned. Moreover, religious practice in India is not complete with “just” prayer; *seeing* the deity is also central (Eck 1998). The viewing of the divine by the devotee is a relational form of seeing: if I am able to see the divine, then it follows that I am seen. The term *darsan* then describes a religious experience central to Hindu worship and is often expressed colloquially, as in, “I went to the temple and had a good *darsan* today.”

Odissi originated as dance performed in Jagannath Temple and for the deity of Jagannath. Even though odissi has transformed itself into a dance that is performed on a global stage and in transnational contexts, its bodily training and repertoire are still performed with the deity of Jagannath placed in the space or with an awareness of his presence. Most of odissi’s various schools of dance (*gurukuls* and *gharanas*) perform with Jagannath present on stage,⁷ and this presence of the divine is then embodied within the dancer, who switches between performing the role of devotee and the deity. Even though the audience may not be privy to her *darsan*, her awareness of Jagannath is ever present.

This study then is fashioned as two different ways of seeing: *drishti* to focus on the immediate, the dancing body, and the form’s “affective histories”; and *darsan*, a way of seeing that which is not always perceptible, a viewing of structural forces at work around odissi and analysis of their ramifications for the form and its practitioners. Like the dancer on stage who sees inside and outside her body, I attempt to do both in this study—to use my *drishti* and *darsan* as a practitioner/scholar looking inside the experience of being an odissi practitioner and at the affective communities of odissi practice, and looking outside at the larger societal context that frames the practices of odissi. Doniger in *The Hindus: An Alternative History* describes dualism⁸ as “the Indian way of thinking”:

It is, I think no accident that India is the land that developed the technique of interweaving two colors of silk threads so that the fabric is what they call peacock's neck, blue if you hold it one way, green another (or sometimes pink, or yellow or purple), and, if you hold it right, both at once. (Doniger 2009: 11)

Although I argue that the term “dualism” as used by Doniger suggests two fixed entities, in my analysis of odissi I attempt to describe a dynamic process, a dialogue between moving parts, a *jugalbandhi*. *Jugalbandhi* roughly translates as “entwined twins,” and is a term used mostly in Indian classical music to describe a performance of two musicians of equal status in which they engage in a dynamic but structured improvisation. It is a performance of sympathetic exchange, each musician exhibiting their unique characteristics but always maintaining a balance. And like any other duet it is one in which each participant shifts and changes their position constantly. Sometimes one performer comes into focus, and the other recedes momentarily; but then they trade and eventually join together in a ringing climax. Similarly, my hope is that this book allows for such a dual framing of the specificities and contradictions of the daily lives of odissi dancers, as well as the larger framework within which they operate. This dialogic and dialectical *jugalbandhi* between a global odissi community and the immediate and local realities of each dancer cannot be overstated.

Alternative Narratives

My study offers a five-part alternative to standard national and historical narratives of odissi. First, I interrogate odissi as a neoclassical dance, rather than as a “traditional” and unchanging form. By neoclassical, I mean a dance form that engages with the “classical” (however problematic that term may be) in new and unseen ways. The term “classical” is not an indigenous one. It is a Western category that has been widely adopted by practitioners of Indian dance.⁹ Some dancers have adopted the term neoclassical (Lopez y Royo 2003b)¹⁰ but it is not in wide usage because of the prevailing myth that all Indian classical dance traces its lineage seamlessly to that iconic Hindu treatise, the *Natya Shastra*.¹¹ Even though discourses of “tradition” and “antiquity” are continuously employed in the commoditization of odissi, each dancer's engagement with tradition is a dynamic one and contributes to the broad variance of the dance as it is performed and practiced today. In this book I look at contemporary sites of choreographic innovation, sites that depart from the traditional *margam* (repertoire) and that dance scholars often ignore because such artistic practices are viewed as breaking allegiances with classical culture. Instead, I argue that such departures are integral to the story of odissi, an interrupted history, and that these departures have enacted and continue to enact the practice of a new odissi tradition. To be clear, these sites of choreographic innovation are not entirely new but the inclusion of

them in the odissi story is a departure from current scholarly practices. By focusing solely on historicizing and categorizing the dance form as an ancient tradition, we are in danger of losing its lifeblood; by researching odissi as a neoclassical form instead, we acknowledge and privilege its dynamic history.

Second, this ethnography moves away from geographically bounded perspectives of cultural production. By studying odissi as a globalized phenomenon practiced by a global dance community rather than as a solely regional one, I show the form to be a highly produced, fluid and mobile medium that crosses boundaries and is continuously reinvented by its varied practitioners. While stories abound of odissi recitals by dancers like Ritha Devi and Indrani Rahman (Rahman 2002), who performed in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s to a relatively uninitiated American audience, putting odissi on the global dance map, it is only in the last two decades that a global odissi dance community has emerged with a transnational presence.¹² But what do we mean when we say global “community,” and who gets to participate in it? Cultural critic Raymond Williams has pointed out that “community” is one of the few words used to describe a form of social organization that does not have negative connotations, such as “society” or “nation” (Williams 1976: 66). Gerald Creed argues that it is precisely this uncontested and common-sense understanding of “community” that warrants our scholarly attention (Creed 2006: 4). Gupta and Ferguson (1992) in “Beyond Culture: Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference” problematize the study of “culture” and “cultural difference” as it relates to how we study community and space and argue that tied to the idea of global community are notions of space and place. Further, in anthropology, there has been a tendency towards an isomorphism, i.e. to superimpose a location or a place over a particular people and/or a culture, and much of the current thinking within the social sciences is built on assumptions that these spaces are autonomous and disconnected. To address this, Gupta and Ferguson posit that studying these spaces as “hierarchically interconnected” allows one to “rethink difference *through* connection” (1992: 8). Building on this recommendation, I study this group of dancers as a global community, but one in which various kinds of status (geographic, socio-economic, linguistic, etc.) are in operation. The increased global networks within this dance community and its visibility in a transnational public sphere in the last few decades have made it necessary to reconceptualize our common-sense notions of community and the discussion of global/local practices such that space is not rendered transparent, but rather brought into the frame of study.

Community can connote homogeneity of experience, and my fieldwork has demonstrated that nothing could be further from the truth. Although I use the term in the singular, I stress that the odissi community is actually comprised of several communities. I look primarily at the work of odissi dancers, musicians, critics, scholars, and gurus in India and the United States. While the UK and

Canada are fertile sites of South Asian dance, I was unable to include them in this study. Though the people in my study are all practitioners in some way, there is a deep variance in each one's experience within this community.

In their efforts to self-produce and/or be produced by presenting organizations, these practicing odissi artists are competing with one another for resources in a climate of aggressive defunding of the arts, both in India and the United States. Dancers are also competing for resources on a global level in order to travel and perform across national and sometimes international borders; the desire to travel with their art has increased and artists are handling touring in ways that are different to those of their predecessors. Artists are negotiating and charting new choreographic and discursive territories as they market themselves within the broader landscape of "world dance." Since dance travels via physical bodies, the bodies performing it are defined and circumscribed by passports, visas, capital flows, and other resources that help or hurt their ability to perform. Furthermore, language and gender play an important role in the ability of dancers to travel and perform on a global stage. For example, diasporic odissi dancers in the United States have had a different experience than, say, their diasporic counterparts in the UK due to varying histories of immigration in each country, which in turn allows varying levels of access to these dancers. The odissi community exists within geographical, institutional, linguistic, regional, national, and gendered borders that demand highly maneuvered negotiations at a local level and artists must do a lot in order to navigate these borders.

Arif Dirlik (2001) points out that the local is not untouched by international networks of activity, as the global functions locally; even local products or commodities must contend with global economies. Moreover, trying to distinguish between "global" and "local" can be a futile exercise; the local and the global may have more in common than is initially apparent, and as Dirlik's analysis of these terms suggests, they actually depend on one another:

The question then is not the confrontation of the global and the local, but of different configurations of "glocality." Instead of assigning some phenomena to the realm of the global and others to the realm of the local, it may be necessary to recognize that in other than the most exceptional cases these phenomena are *all* both local and global, but that they are not local and global in the same way. (Dirlik 2001: 29)

As Dirlik explains, ultimately the local is not separate from the global and the global is not separate from the local, but the relationship of power between the two is asymmetrical. The dancers within this global odissi community who do not (or cannot) travel to perform outside their "local" areas must contend with the global expansion of odissi, and consequently compete with other dancers in local, national, and global arenas. This unevenness of access, often due to

linguistic and financial barriers, also plays out through cyber networks such as those found on odissi online groups, in online dance journals, and in performance opportunities. Although Bhubaneswar, the capital of Odisha, remains a center for learning odissi, it is only by performing in major cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata, and by touring abroad, that dancers are recognized and validated. Dancers in Odisha must therefore have the resources to travel out of state to make their mark. Dancers working in major Indian cities or in the United States may have more ability to travel compared to dancers from smaller cities. On the flip side, for dancers located in India, their placement within Indian geographical borders can provide them with an inherent authenticity that eludes dancers working in the diaspora. These India-based artists have the freedom to collaborate with artists of other Indian dance forms, for example, to stretch the definitions of the “national.” By contrast, odissi dancers located in diasporic contexts such as Minneapolis, Washington DC, and New York must adhere more strictly to the “rules” of odissi in order to prove their authenticity. Odissi is seen by audiences in the West as representing “Indianness,” even if this may not be the intention or wish of the dancer. As a result, the odissi performer in the diaspora may be forced to work in a prescribed “national” frame when performing in transnational contexts.

Third, my research into how odissi is traversing national boundaries engages with what has been described by Dipesh Chakrabarty as the problematic of “rough translation” in colonialist literature and replicated colonialist approximations of area studies before the globalization of scholarship. For Chakrabarty, to “challenge that model of ‘rough translation’ is to pay critical and unrelenting attention to the very process of translation” (Chakrabarty 2000: 17) because “the problem of capitalist modernity cannot any longer be seen simply as a sociological problem of historical transitions (as in the famous ‘transition debates’ in European history) but as a problem of translation as well” (ibid.). Chakrabarty’s problematic of “rough translation” is a useful strategy in an ongoing debate over how to think about world dance practices and how they are read in varying contexts. For example, the use of the word “traditional” to describe Indian classical dance is inadequate, a “rough translation.” Using Western terms to translate aspects of these dance forms perhaps make consumption easier for Western and global audiences, but it also limits understanding. Many terms relating to odissi have no direct translation into English, so English words used to stand in for them become an approximation of these categories of descriptors, and correspondingly an approximation of bodily experiences. Consequently, I argue that the use of indigenous terms as they relate to these movement practices is a political and necessary act. To that end, I critique the use of terms like “tradition” and “practice” as a way to describe the training and performance of odissi dance and other dance forms and instead adopt and employ the Sanskrit terms, *parampara* (transmission of knowledge), *drishti* (gaze), *darsan* (seeing the

divine), and *sadhana* (daily practice). I use these terms not simply because they are in Sanskrit but because many of them, such as *sadhana*, *drishti*, and *darsan*, are anchored in our sense perception and open up a space to acknowledge embodied ways of knowing, as I will describe later in more detail. These bodily ways of knowing are familiar within many Indian movement practices but can be experienced anywhere. I am aware here of the danger of using Sanskrit terms since the insistence on Sanskritization in India in many cases has aligned with a fevered Hindu nationalism and has come to be associated with the desire for a homogenized Hindu nation. Wendy Doniger, in her banned book *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (2009: 5), complicates the use of Sanskrit further as the language of an elite minority that “won the race to the archives.” While I would agree with Doniger, and remain concerned about the ways Sanskrit has been politically deployed, I maintain that certain Sanskrit terms are also connected to regional or vernacular languages of India, and therefore speak to a local experience. In addition, as dancers move between the discursive worlds of India and the West¹³—and between Odia (or Bengali or Hindi) and English—this approach of utilizing indigenous or local terms allows the artists to address the power and consequences of *both* languages in how they position and perform their work.

Fourth, this book investigates the embodied practices of odissi using the language of humanities and social sciences. In so doing, it attempts to address the slippage between embodied knowledges and the discourse used to describe them. Historically, scholars on dance have privileged written works on dance and performance over other forms of epistemology, such as oral transmission. Much of the discourse of the body in the social sciences has privileged the study of the body as *representation* rather than body as *experience*. To address the privileging of textual sources, dance scholars have found the phenomenological approach a useful way to write against this approach and acknowledge embodied ways of knowing. Ann Cooper Albright in *Engaging Bodies: The Politics and Poetics of Corporeality* (2013) uses phenomenology as a lens through which to look at dance at the nexus of human consciousness and everyday experience. Similarly, Sondra Fraleigh employs phenomenology “as a way of describing and defining dance, shifting between the experience of the dancer and that of the audience” (Fraleigh, 1991: 11). Fraleigh explains that the challenge of phenomenology is not to keep the dance within the realm of the experiential but to “arrive at a shared meaning” (Fraleigh 1991:11). Using terms like *sadhana* and *darsan* grounds the experiences of doing and seeing, and attends to this phenomenological notion of being in the body. As Csordas (1994: 12) clarifies, “The point of elaborating a paradigm of embodiment is then not to supplant textuality but to offer it as a dialectical partner.” To that end, I pay attention to embodiment as “an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world” (ibid.). I use the phrase “pay attention” quite consciously because, as Csordas has pointed out, the fields of

textuality and semiotics are far more mature than the study of embodiment (Csordas 1993: 137). Perhaps the fear of an embodied form of knowledge is that it is bodily, subjective, primal, and therefore not to be trusted. However, as dancers and movement practitioners, trust in the body is a prerequisite to participation and it is with the understanding and acceptance of its primacy and subjectivity that I offer the body as a text and critical source of analysis.

Finally, this project makes a contribution to women's history and offers implications and contributions to postcolonial studies, dance history/performance studies, and related fields in four important ways. First, it destabilizes a standard and uncritical history of odissi dance, which employs the mystique of the *mahari* temple dancer¹⁴ but does not include her in the post-independence codification of the dance. And although little of the actual *mahari* dance is seen on stage today, her image is one that is continually employed in traditional odissi dance presentations. I call into question the erasure of the *mahari* from odissi's history, and consequently the odissi present, to revisit her role anew. The Jayantika group led the process of restructuring odissi and elevating the dance form to national and classical status; this book seeks to understand why the role of the *mahari* was rendered nearly non-existent in their efforts. I also look at how, in colonial historiographies, her gender, class, and her association with sex work due to disenfranchisement functioned to exclude her from this "traditional" and "classical" art form. Second, this book examines the role of middle and upper class women who helped to popularize the dance in India and beyond. Their class status played an important role in distinguishing them from *maharis* but they used the idealized trope of the *mahari* figure in their process of codification. Third, this project explores the ways in which the dancers' bodies have been policed through classicism and *auchitya* (appropriateness), which are regulated via expectations of demeanor, dress, and choreography. Finally, my focus on female choreographers and their work provides an alternative history to the conventional story that male odissi gurus were and are the primary creators of odissi choreography and to the notion that it is the work of the latter alone that must be studied. My research attempts to validate the work of the women artists who were crucial to the recognition of odissi and their place within the canon.

Finding a Nomenclature for Odissi Dance

In her projections for the future of odissi, critic Leela Venkataraman points to what she sees as an inevitable, and unfortunate, split between the form of odissi and its content—narrative, cultural, devotional, or otherwise. We begin the exploration of this elusive distinction between "form" and "content" by defining and examining key Sanskrit terms in the Indian dance lexicon. It is commonly believed that Indian classical dance today is comprised of two strands, *nrta*¹⁵ and *nrtya*.¹⁶ *Nrta* is defined as pure dance and *nrtya* as mimetic dance. *Nrta* is abstract and made up of rhythmic movement and *nrtya* is seen as narrative and

laden with meaning communicated via hand gestures and facial expressions. The latter incorporates *abhinaya*, the art of expressing a particular mood (*rasa*) or sentiment, sometimes described as stylized mime. *Abhinaya* is accomplished through facial expressions and symbolic *mudras* (hand gestures), which are employed to interpret a story or theme. Seen narrowly, *nrtta* is sometimes considered the form and *nrtya* the content. *Nrtta* together with the *nrtya* and *abhinaya* brings us to our third term: *natya*, or “dance drama.” In addition to representing the combining of abstract and narrative dance movements, *natya* reflects a holistic approach to performance, including dance, story, and music and expressions within its frame. In this vein, *natya* was also the Sanskrit term for drama and has since become synonymous with “Indian classical dance” and is used to describe all eight nationally recognized, codified dance forms.¹⁷

The fact that *natya* or classical dance can be translated as “dance drama” reveals that Indian dance is not one or the other, that is, simply pure dance or abstracted movement, but that dramatic components of storytelling, gestures, narrative, facial expressions, and character development are all intrinsic to it. *Natya* is Indian classical dance, but in the Western context it gets translated as “Indian dance,” when in fact it should be translated as “dance drama.” Even in postcolonial India, this act of “rough translation” has created a distinction between dance and drama, a distinction that is debatable and problematic. In the Western context, the disciplinary and discursive distinctions between dance and theater are much sharper, and at the same time Western forms of contemporary dance allow for a blurring between dance and theater often not encouraged for “world dance.” At issue today for odissi (and other classical styles) is what the most “authentic” representation of the form is, and what kind of practices will ensure its preservation. What adds confusion to this debate is that *nrtya* and *natya*, distinct but related terms, are used almost interchangeably, leaving out *nrtta* such that *nrtta* is undervalued and, as mentioned earlier, is seen to represent the crude form, the rhythm without content.

Leela Venkataraman’s statement above reflects an anxiety that as odissi gains ground as a form outside India, and is removed from its regional (Odia) context, it will become devoid of its “original” content. She posits that if greater emphasis is placed on *nrtta* by contemporary, diasporic, or newer performers, it will strip the form of its intended meanings. This perspective reflects a regionalism in odissi and in the field of classical dance. By promoting the regional context of the dance form over technique, each form retains its own distinctive flavor, perhaps the anxiety is that if stripped of language and regional context, odissi as we know it will cease to be. Also the implication here is that *nrtta*, or pure movement, is somehow devoid of meaning and significance and therefore of lesser value. This critique of the future of odissi often deployed by classicists has significant ramifications for contemporary practitioners of Indian dance. It discourages innovation, especially for dancers who perform outside the regional context, because it

reifies the notion that *nrtta* or pure dance cannot claim the “essence” of odissi without the regional specificity.

In response to the perspectives underlying Venkataraman’s assertions, I turn to dance scholars Alessandra Iyer and Mandakranta Bose for two counterarguments.¹⁸ Iyer (1993) debunks the assumption commonly held by dancers and scholars that the *Natya Shastra* discusses *nrtta* and *nrtya* as two separate strands of Indian dance. And Iyer and Bose (2007) both challenge the idea that *nrtta* is merely technique devoid of the heart of the form, while *nrtya* alone conveys the essence or beauty of the dance form.

It is critical that we begin with an understanding of the purported source of these terms, the *Natya Shastra*, and its significance to practitioners. The *Natya Shastra*, a treatise on the performing arts written in Sanskrit between 200 BCE and 200 CE by the sage Bharata, is considered a foundational text for the Indian classical forms—odissi, bharata natyam, kathak, kathakali, kuchipudi, manipuri, mohiniattam, and sattriya. Dancers of all eight forms consider the *Natya Shastra* their canonical and ordinary text and claim an unbroken link to it. Bose reminds us that Bharata describes the *Natya Shastra* as the fifth Veda—the Vedas being four Hindu scriptural texts considered the oldest of Sanskrit literature. By linking the *Natya Shastra* to these canonical writings, Bharata raises its status from a dramatic treatise to sacred knowledge (Bose 2007: 9). Thus, as the treatise provides a timeless legitimacy, exponents of all forms have used a connection to the *Natya Shastra* as the basis to attain classical status for their practices.

Upon a closer reading of the *Natya Shastra*, however, we find that certain key elements within it have been ignored. As Bose and Iyer have shown, although there are several references to *nrtta* (pure dance) and *abhinaya*, there is no mention of *nrtya*, the narrative strand, as a separate category in the *Natya Shastra*. *Abhinaya* is mentioned in conjunction with *natya* or dance drama but not *nrtya*. As Iyer notes, use of the word *natya* or drama does not refer to a modern form of acting or theater but rather a “combination of stylized mime and the spoken word.” (1993: 6) This has several implications: if *nrtya* is not even mentioned in the *Natya Shastra*, then where does it come from? And when and why did it become so critical in our understanding of Indian classical dance? Iyer argues that this absence of *nrtya* in the *Natya Shastra* does not necessarily mean that *nrtya* does not have an ancient lineage, but it is certainly not found in the *Natya Shastra* as is believed and taught by most dancers worldwide. It is mentioned in the *Abhinaya Chandrika*, a text dated between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries AD, but in “embryonic” form. According to Iyer, it is possible that *nrtya* did exist in regional or *deshi* form, but not in pan-Indian form, as evidenced by its absence in the *Natya Shastra*. According to Iyer, *nrtya* probably came into being as Sanskrit drama, or *natya* faded in importance and the regional languages came into prominence¹⁹ such that *nrtya*, the regional manifestation of *natya*, gained significance over the pan-Indian manifestation of the *Natya Shastra*. That

is, *nrtya* manifested in regional terms rather than national terms, and although the *Natya Shastra* remains a guide for several Indian arts, it also accommodates regional specificities.

Dance scholar Mandakranta Bose challenges the pre-eminence of *nrtya* by revealing the importance of dynamic pure movement in the *Natya Shastra*. She argues that the author Bharata informs the reader that since Shiva, the Lord of Dance himself, is in the audience, *nrta* (pure dance) should be performed *prior* to any performance of *natya*, suggesting that *nrta* must exist independently of *natya*. Shiva, according to author Bharata, speaks of the beauty of bodily movement that is unattached to any gestural or performative meaning, and is instead performed for the sake of the beauty of dance itself. The fact that Bharata indicates that Shiva asserts the importance of pure movement implies that *nrta* or pure dance as a category must have existed prior to *natya* and *abhinaya*, which came into being with the *Natya Shastra*. And if this canonical text is to be believed, then *nrta* or pure dance should be at least as important as *nrtya*, narrative dance.

Iyer also argues for revisiting the importance of *nrta*. Rather than discounting it simply as “pure dance,” she draws attention to how the modern “restorers” of Indian classical dance privileged *nrtya* over *nrta*, but that “*nrtya* is, unambiguously, not what the *Natya Shastra* describes as dance” (Iyer 1993: 6). As we can see, *nrtya* has been privileged over *nrta* by falsely claiming its presence in the canonical *Natya Shastra*, illustrating the “re-invention” of classical forms by modern-day “restorers.” It must be mentioned that another reason that the *Natya Shastra* is valued over other texts is not only because it is widely regarded as the fifth Veda but also because it is in Sanskrit. The history of Indian dance has shown us how the reach for classicization has privileged Sanskrit over the regional. I discuss this in greater detail in the following chapter.

Iyer goes on to ask, what is *nrta*? According to the *Natya Shastra*, *nrta* is comprised of *karanas*, or units of dance movement, such as a *hastha* (hand gesture) or *sthana* (stance), and these 108 *karanas* in various combinations provide phrases or seeds of choreographic movement. According to Iyer, *nrta* builds on the movement of *hatha* yoga and the study of sculptures, and it embodies a philosophy of space and time. Iyer argues that the importance of *nrta* needs to be re-evaluated and suggests that we place the body at the center of the cosmos as embodied by Shiva, the Lord of Dance and the master yogi. Shiva’s *tandava*, or cosmic dance, is not described through elements of *nrtya* but rather through his geometric and spatial position of *nrta* or pure dance. And the *karanas* in the *Natya Shastra* are explained in geometric terms such that the human body is an overlay of the cosmos in the way that *yantras* or *mandalas* are geometric abstractions of various gods and goddesses.²⁰ If this is true, then *nrta* as intended by Bharata is deeply significant and is able to carry with it a spiritual content not solely available in *nrtya*. The tradition of *nrta* and its relationship to bodily, temple, and cosmic iconography in Hindu thought needs further evaluation.

Iyer concludes: “The restoration of Indian classical dance—in itself an innovation—should avoid trying to crystallize the art into a museum piece ... thus a reappraisal of *nrtta* and of its philosophical roots can be simultaneously ‘innovative’ and ‘traditional’ in the context of contemporary Indian classical dance” (1993: 12).

Bose too reminds us of Bharata’s authorial intent in this relationship of dance to the cosmos—Bharata describes the *Natyashastra* as *Natyaveda* or the fifth Veda, raising its status from a dramatic treatise to sacred knowledge (Bose 2007: 9). Iyer challenges the idea that *nrtya* alone carries the dance and conveys the essence or beauty of the dance form and that without *nrtya* it is just pure technique devoid of the heart of the form. This preoccupation with *nrtya* over *nrtta* is recent and has to do with a narrow regionalism.

So what of *abhinaya*, the mimetic strand of *nrtya*? The odissi *margam* or repertoire includes *abhinaya* items such as stories from the *Geeta Govinda*, with beautiful renditions of Radha yearning for Krishna or the lovemaking of Radha and Krishna. These stories are certainly pan-Indian and even diasporic. Though the *Geeta Govinda* is certainly a primary source for dance narratives in odissi, *abhinaya* is used to convey other stories as well. When being enacted in new eras or contexts, traditional *abhinaya* content can find new relevance. To illustrate, an odissi colleague of mine told me that her guru agreed to teach her an *abhinaya* item, but only after she was married. The piece, *Yahi Madhav*, describes Radha waiting all night for Krishna to arrive. Her guru was of the view that until she had experienced a real relationship she would not be able to draw on the necessary emotional reserve. The “context” required by the guru was not a village in the Odishan countryside, but rather the emotional experience of being a bereft lover—an experience hardly unique to the Indian context. It builds on the idea that one must have a certain emotional maturity and life experience to be able to “perform” such a nuanced *abhinaya*. On the other hand, Kelucharan Mohapatra, odissi guru exemplar and legendary performer of *abhinaya*, transcends the need for lived experience, crossing gender expectations to portray Radha with such precision that the viewer is transported beyond his physical presence as a male dancer. Even for dancers in Odisha, the ability to imagine Radha and Krishna is an ability of skill and imagination and training, bringing to it the performer’s ability to transcend their bodies and transport the audience. In my experience of learning *abhinaya*, my guru, Durga Charan Ranbir told me that *abhinaya* cannot be taught but must be felt. Unlike in other odissi dance pieces, the steps or even the rhythmic patterns used therein are less precise than the need to create a mood and to convey meaning.

Venkataraman’s comments at the beginning of this introduction stated that form and content will eventually split as odissi is performed outside the context of Odisha. I hope to have complicated this arbitrary distinction between form and content, which is sometimes seen as the distinction between *nrtta* and *nrtya*,

and shown that the way these terms are used in a contemporary context does not allow for its full potential. *Nrta* and *nrtya* are, in fact, inextricable from one another. Such an approach speaks to the extraordinary character of odissi that allows it to be reconfigured in different but real contexts, contexts not limited to the geographical borders of Odisha. This is a possibility I explore more deeply in subsequent chapters.

The use of other terms to describe odissi calls for critical attention to how the slippage in describing odissi has caused us to “see” the dance differently but also limit its possibilities. One such term is “classical.” Frederique Marglin in her ethnography of *maharis*, *Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri* (1985) points out that there is no adequate Hindi or Sanskrit translation for the term “classical,” and dance was simply referred to as *nach* (dance) by the *maharis*.²¹ The distinction between “classical” and “folk” dance is based on a Western model, and emerged in India at the turn of the twentieth century, when performing arts institutions and research academies were set up. This creation of the category “classical” in Indian dance reiterated a need to position Indian art and culture in Western terms; by making dance a “classical” form. Indian arts institutions were able to align themselves with the values and antiquity associated with ancient Greece and its art. In doing so, the revivalists and nationalists would be able to counter the critique offered by colonial classifications that often framed indigenous art forms as primitive or less sophisticated than Western forms. Referring to these Indian dance forms as “classical” placed them on a par with ballet, causing the revivalists and nationalists to favor the secular aspects of the dance over the traditional (Marglin 1985: 2). Consequently, much of the way odissi is conceptualized today developed in dialogue with Western notions of dance. While some dancers today use the term “neoclassical” instead of “classical,” which acknowledges the codification and institutionalization of this dance form in the 1950s and 1960s,²² most odissi dancers and dance companies prefer to use the term “classical” because it allows them to build on the discursive and institutional advantages that the term “classical” signals. Further, use of the term “classical” also indicates a rigorous training that builds on the *guru–shishya*²³ relationship.

Alessandra Royo has pointed out that “classicization” is possible for any regional dance form after it has been adequately Sanskritized²⁴ and Hinduized (Lopez y Royo 2003b) and the pan-Indian text of the *Natya Shastra* has been used to claim antiquity. *Marga* means the pathway but is also the overarching framework for all Indian dance. It is often used to describe the *margam* of the dance. In the case of odissi, this means the developmental pathway of the repertoire from the opening invocatory *mangalacharan* to the finale or *moksha*.²⁵ Similarly, all Indian classical dance forms follow a *margam*. How this *margam* is enacted by each dance form varies by regional difference or *deshi* (which means of the country or land) reading or its unique local interpretation. For example,

as described in the *Natya Shastra*, the term *natyarambhe* is the first description of *pataka hasta* or the *mudra*, which denotes an open palm with no gaps between the fingers at the end of outstretched arms; the specificity of how the bend is embodied is known as *deshi*. In bharata natyam, *natyarambhe* is interpreted with a slight bend in the elbows, but in odissi with a deeper arm bend, with the regional variance of *deshi* providing the difference between the two forms. This difference between *marga* and *deshi* is an important one because it shows us that the *Natya Shastra*, which is often seen as a canonical text, is itself deeply cognizant of *deshi* (or regional) variations. The *marga*, or pathway, provides an overarching framework for the development of a classical repertoire. In my fieldwork, I have also heard *marga* applied to the way of the gods and *deshi* as the path of the human. Problematizing these terms is essential to a critical understanding of odissi, providing a more nuanced understanding of its possibilities.

Positionality as Scholar and Practitioner

The impetus for this project, as well as the final formulation of these questions, arose from trying to understand many of the contradictions and ironies that came to light during my work as a practitioner in India and the United States over twenty years. Trying to theorize about a form that is in constant motion has been both a challenge and an inspiration. Many of the dancers with whom I spoke have found strategies to articulate their views and perform them on highly heterogeneous, global stages. Like the dancers I study, my own location is a shifting one. In researching performers of odissi, I work both as a dance practitioner and an academic. In my lifetime, I have also crossed the boundaries between a “native” Indian and a “diasporic” Indian. My scholarship, personal journey, and artistic development are intertwined. Growing up in New Delhi, I first started learning odissi dance at the age of seven, under Srinath Raut. Sadly, I was more interested in climbing trees and roller-skating than the rigor of sustained dance practice. At sixteen, I saw a duet between odissi dancer Madhavi Mudgal and bharata natyam dancer Leela Sampson in New Delhi and was moved to tears by the beauty of their performance as well as a deep sense of loss for what I had unknowingly given up. I began to study with Madhavi Mudgal shortly thereafter but due to difficult family circumstances I had to take several breaks from my odissi training. After graduate school in Illinois in the early 1990s, where I had no access to dance besides the occasional jazz class, I moved to New York City. Odissi classes were hard to find and private ones were well beyond my meager budget, as I navigated my way through low-paying jobs to secure a green card before my practical training period allowed by immigration authorities ran out. For a few years I studied with Ritha Devi but due to my long and erratic work hours I found it difficult to sustain a regular regimen. Finally, in my late twenties, I began working regularly with Bani Ray²⁶ in New York and Durga Charan Ranbir²⁷ in Bhubaneswar. This peripatetic but long-term mode of training and

performance is perhaps what alerted me to a variance in the practice of odissi, because unlike many odissi dancers, especially those of my generation who stay with one guru for the majority of their lives, my own experience raised questions about how odissi is practiced and performed by others. I began to wonder if my experience of learning odissi was unique, and if not, how this changed the ways in which odissi is performed globally. In 2003, I co-founded Trinayan Collective, an odissi dance company based in New York City, and from 2003 to 2008 was co-director. With my dance colleague Kakoli Mukherjee, I then co-founded Sakshi Productions (www.sakshiproductions.org) in 2008, a dance company that creates and performs neoclassical and contemporary odissi works. Since 2003, I have performed at numerous venues ranging from community temples to Lincoln Center and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center in New York City. Since the early 1990s, I have also worked as an experimental and documentary filmmaker, which has given me a deep understanding of varying forms of representation across mediums. Dance, like film, occurs in time and space; the study of form and content is essential to its creation. Though we consider dance to be ephemeral—gone after it is performed—the practice of dance in a transnational context lives beyond the edge of the proscenium stage via cameras, screens, and social media, lingering long after the curtain falls. While we often think of dance as live performance, it has become a highly mediated one. The exploration of the dancing body must include an exploration of the body *and* its mediation and representation. As the associate director/choreographer for Harmattan Theater (www.harmattantheater.com), a performance group committed to an environmentally and socially engaged theater, I have also used Indian movement traditions to explore site-specific performance in urban contexts. Working in these varied capacities with several dance companies has meant that I have been deeply involved in all aspects of performing, including fundraising, choreographing, directing, and working with several presenters, funders, and community groups.

This kind of research work can be located within a trajectory of scholars working both in and outside postcolonial India who have analyzed these embodied dance forms and investigate valuable sites in order to analyze the power (and lack thereof) embedded in its practice. They have interrogated these dances not just as aesthetic forms but also as embodied practices and ways of knowing shaped by specific histories. Some prominent examples of this kind of scholarship are the work of Pallabi Chakravorty (1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2008) and Veena Oldenburg (1990) in their studies of kathak, and Kalpana Ram (2005, 2009, 2011), Amrit Srinivasan (1984, 1985), Kalpana Kannabiran (1995), Avanthi Meduri (1996), and Janet O'Shea (2003, 2007) in their interrogation of bharata natyam and its histories. Uttara Asha Coorlawala (1992, 1993, 1994, 2003, 2004) has written about various aspects of Indian dance ranging from *rasa* theory to different facets of its complicated history.²⁸ Ananya Chatterjea (2004) and Alessandra Lopez y Royo's (1993, 2003a, 2003b) studies

on odissi have helped frame my own research and study of that form. More recently, Priya Srinivasan's book, *Sweating Saris* (2011), looks at the bharata natyam dancer in the context of transnational migration, gender, and labor. *Performing Pasts* (Peterson and Soneji 2008) examines the performing arts in the context of modernity in South India and *Unfinished Gestures* (Soneji 2012) looks at the encounters of the *devadasis* of South India and colonial modernity. Further, Susan Reed's work on kandyan dance (2010) and its transformation from ritual to national dance in Sri Lanka is another example of this intervention. Ketu Katrak's book on contemporary Indian dance (2011) is the first expansive and critical work of its kind to focus exclusively on a new dance language in India and the diaspora. While my focus has been on odissi in India and the US, there has been extensive work done on South Asian dance in the UK. "South Asian Dance: An Art Britain No Longer Ignores" is a case study conducted by faculty at the University of Roehampton (2002) and draws on more than fifteen years of work by Grau, David, Meduri, Lopez y Royo, and Prickett.²⁹ It has addressed many facets of Indian dance in the diaspora, engaging with local choreographers, dance writers, teachers, publishers, and organizations involved with South Asian dance in Britain, in a holistic study that is beneficial to scholars and practitioners alike. I am indebted to all these scholars and studies on various aspects of Indian dance and hope to continue the conversation and broaden the discussion.

Methodology

Studying the emergence of odissi as a commodity within the global cultural marketplace contests the glib binaries of "traditional" and "contemporary," "local" and "global," "fixed" and "transitory," building in a methodological elasticity that has allowed me to better understand odissi dance and its performing community as it traverses multiple borders and identities. Helena Wulff (2007: 139) refers to this methodological strategy as "yo-yo fieldwork," a mobile and multi-local form of research. This approach has gone against the traditional path of ethnographic fieldwork of first going into the field for a year or two and then returning to write up one's notes and complete analysis. For me, being able to go back and forth from my home in New York, and later Pennsylvania, to the field, which includes various locations in India and the United States, has given me a more nuanced understanding of odissi and the movement of this complex community of dancers.

This book project was seeded out of my dance training at a young age and later during my doctoral fieldwork in 2005–2009 in six cities in India and the US. This manuscript builds on my doctoral research in two significant ways. First, I completed additional fieldwork from 2010 to 2013 in New Delhi, India and New York City to reflect changes in scholarship, pedagogy, and practice. Second, all chapters have been significantly revised and three of

them rewritten. In addition to New York and New Delhi, this multi-sited ethnography was conducted in Kolkata and Bhubaneswar, India with additional field sites in Khajuraho, India and Alexandria, VA. My research population is divided into three categories: dancers (gurus, students, and performers), critics (dance critics and writers), and organizers (government officials, funding agencies, and presenters). I conducted formal and informal interviews, working from a specific set of queries for the people in each category. These interviews were semi-structured conversations with the questions providing a guideline for discussing key aspects of their work, including the logistics and challenges of performances, tours, and funding. In addition, I followed discussions on online discussion groups devoted to odissi dance, and consistently checked dance websites and social media in order to stay continually engaged with the field, and bring depth to the study.

The layout of the book is as follows. In Chapter 1, I provide an alternative history of an “ancient” dance form by focusing on issues that have come to define the form, and have influenced how odissi is perceived, performed, and presented on a global stage, and reiterate the importance of calling it a neoclassical form. It is by no means intended to be an exhaustive history of odissi, but rather to draw attention to the erasures, especially of the *maharis*, in its more conventional narrative. I trace this history from its sculptural and scriptural roots, and examine the role of the *maharis* and the *gotipuas*³⁰ in odissi practice. I then explore how colonial and postcolonial events, including the nationalist movement, have shaped odissi dance, as well as how historiography has shaped the story that has been passed down. Finally, I elaborate on the role of the Jayantika group and the process of reconstruction that has contributed to odissi as it is performed today. I also look at how Odisha’s regional identity has developed, in part, as a response to its colonial history and its unique relationship to Bengal. Hindutva (Hindu right-wing) movements have attempted to place the origin of the deity of Jagannath, and the language of Odia, with the ancient kingdom of Kalinga, thus seamlessly connecting precolonial and postcolonial Hinduisms (Chatterji 2009)—a historical reading which I also challenge.³¹ This history is essential background to this book, to better understand how and why it influences contemporary practitioners of odissi.

In Chapter 2, I use an embodied approach to learning and examine how a group of dancers work within and beyond the traditions of odissi dance as a way to expand the existing repertoire or *margam* (literally, pathway). How are new works produced and what constitutes innovation in a dance form that is frequently identified as a traditional one? This chapter argues that dancers engage continuously and dynamically with tradition(s) to create innovative work that is accomplished via the daily practice of *sadhana*, such that innovation becomes an embodiment of that effort. By exploring odissi through the embodied knowledge of its practitioners and their *sadhana*, this chapter

provides an alternative way to understand a dance both rooted in a ritual form and also performed on a global stage, in the language of the humanities and social sciences, while simultaneously addressing the problem of “rough translation” through the use of words like *parampara* and *sadhana*.

In Chapter 3, I focus on an incident that has been referred to as the “costume controversy,” in order to illustrate some of the ways in which the local comes into contact with the global. Described simply, the Kuala Lumpur-based Sutra Dance Theatre touring in India in 2005 came under intense public scrutiny for their costumes, which in turn led to various national and local debates around “appropriateness” or *auchitya*. This particular incident brings into focus three kinds of conflicts. The first is around the female body, and the *auchitya* (appropriateness) of her attire, and the expectation for the classical dancer to distinguish herself from the excesses, vulgarity, and commoditization of Bollywood. This anxiety around vulgarity is tethered to the history of the *maharis* discussed earlier. The second conflict is centered on the tension between regional identity in Odisha versus national culture and/or global forms of expression. I posit that this tension between the “national” and “regional” is akin to what has been described by geographer Wes Flack (1997) as “neolocalism.” Flack’s term “neolocalism” is reflected in the desire of some members of the odissi community to re-establish the importance of the Odia language and Orissan culture in the dance form, to challenge the homogenization associated with nationalism and globalization. This neolocalist drive is exemplified in the reactions experienced by the Sutra Dance Theatre when they performed in Bhubaneswar. The third conflict I examine in this chapter is around the issue of “authenticity” and how it is policed in a neoliberal context.

Chapter 4 is an investigation of the varied experiences of the global community of odissi dancers as they negotiate a complex web of cultural codes policed by state-run and private institutions, other dancers and dance companies, and the barriers of geography, language, age, gender, and ethnicity. I argue that a “new” odissi dancer has emerged in the last two decades, one who is different from her predecessor and has been recast in the context of neoliberalism. This “new” dancer aligns with the youthful Indian global citizen, a product of the neoliberal economy, and often it is only dancers who fit the profile of the “new” odissi dancer who are able to maintain a successful career in odissi. Most often, they still come from middle and upper middle class families who are able to sustain the long investment required for training and performing. This “new” odissi dancer also capitalizes on the figure of the *mahari*, but has become partially rehabilitated rather than simply erased. Furthermore, dancers who are unable to obtain financial support must align themselves with prominent gurus and perform as part of their ensembles. Finally, I examine which aspects of odissi are celebrated and which are lost in the context of a neoliberal economy.

In Chapter 5, I examine how dance practitioners create what I call “odissistan”—a fluid and mobile notion of sacred space that can be individual, communal, or both—to develop a sense of belonging. I argue that these sacred spaces are not limited to geographical or physical arenas but rather are embodied, nonlocal spaces, carried via dancing bodies and enacted through the variables of *sthan*, *kaal*, and *patra*, or place, time, and peoples. This ability of odissistan to be fluid and mobile, on and off stage, and in heterogeneous contexts for myriad audiences, allows for a form of political agency and community activism. Odissistan, then, is a term I have invented to describe my vision of a shared sacred space comprised of *rasikas*, dancers, and others. I use this term to denote an imperfect, ideational space based on what I see, experience, and hope for the odissi community to embody. By odissistan, I describe three distinct kinds of spaces: an internal sacred space of the dancer, the sacred space of practice and performance, and the communal space of dancers collectively. I return here to the conceptual and bodily anchors for this study, *drishti* and *darsan*, discussed earlier in this introduction and later in Chapter 2, which also help explain how odissistan is created and how it functions.

In sum, odissi is a neoclassical form, the history of which is much more complex and fractured than is commonly believed. It is a dance form that continues to reinvent itself—the phenomenon of reinvention being built into the story of odissi—and its practitioners have created new contexts, new spaces, and a changing technique. Further, odissi is a highly produced and mobile dance form influenced by neoliberal and national factors, and needs to be studied as such, because despite being a global community it is one marked by varying degrees of patronage and access. I conduct this study advocating for a change in the terminology used to describe Indian dance, preferring the more multivalent and context-specific Sanskrit terms. This allows us to understand the dance as an embodied form by giving weight to the body of the dancer as performer, laborer, and historian. And I do this as a practitioner-scholar who seeks to honor the *jugalbandhi* of *darsan* and *drishti*—crucial to a holistic reading of this dynamic dance. The nature of performance is such that one must be able to work around injuries, torn costumes, bells falling off, jewelry being lost on stage, and steps getting mixed up. Like the dancer on stage, the writer too runs the risk of becoming *betaal* (without rhythm), or losing an earring on stage, and faces similar challenges of writing ethnographies of embodied forms and movement practices with the possibility of losing sight of important information or perhaps mis-stepping in translating reality onto the page.

Notes

1. Alessandra Lopez y Royo (2003b), building on the work of other dancers and dance scholars, explains the discursive ramifications of capitalizing forms of Indian classical dance with respect to *bharata natyam*. Royo along with Chitra Sundaram, choreographer,

performer and long term editor of *pulse*, a British South Asian magazine devoted to dance, (Chitra Sundaram, Editorial, *pulse*, Autumn 2003, p.1.) makes a compelling case to not capitalize these dance forms, with the argument that Western classical ballet and other transnational dance forms are not capitalized. I have adopted this practice and use “odissi” instead of “Odissi.”

2. Interview with Leela Venkataraman, New Delhi, April 2007.
3. *Odra Magadha* is referred to in the *Natya Shastra*, a treatise on the arts of India, written by Bharata between the second century BCE and the second century AD.
4. Epic Records, 1991, from the album *Dangerous*. It was written, composed, and produced by Michael Jackson and Bill Bottrell.
5. The ambiguity of the exact date is explored by Ratna Roy in her book *Neo-Classical Odissi Dance* (2009).
6. There are several recent news articles and books that talk about India in these terms, including *Reimagining India: Unlocking the Potential of Asia's Next Superpower* (McKinsey and Company 2013) and *Superpower: The Amazing Race between China's Hare and India's Tortoise* (Bahl 2010).
7. *Gurukul* or *gharana* is a term used to describe a school of dance or music, where the lineage is built around the founding teacher. This practice of Jagannath being placed on stage is not the custom in the Deba Prasad Das *gurukul*; they believe that Jagannath should only be witnessed outside the temple during the annual Rath Yatra.
8. McKim Marriot (1976) discusses the concept of dualism.
9. In Chapter 2, I discuss the strategic import of this word detail.
10. Royo notes that some commentators and writers of Indian dance such as Sunil Kothari and Kapila Vatsayan have used the term “neoclassical.” Others such as Pallabi Chakravorty and myself use this term to describe our dance companies.
11. This tour de force work dates to 200 BCE and is comprised of thirty-seven chapters with details of dance vocabulary and grammar. It is acknowledged as the oldest surviving text on stagecraft. It is not limited to odissi but includes dramaturgy, dance, and music.
12. The cultural “exchange” prior to this decade has been called “internationalism” and “interculturalism.” Rustom Bharucha discusses this in detail in his book, *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking through Theatre in the Age of Globalization* (2000).
13. I specifically mean the United States and the UK.
14. *Mahari* is the Odia word for *devadasi* or “temple dancer.”
15. Also spelled *nritta*.
16. Also spelled *nritya* or *nrutya*.
17. Another example of the problematic of these kinds of “rough translations” (Chakrabarty).
18. It is important to note that Alessandra Iyer and Alessandra Lopez y Royo are the same scholar publishing under different last names.
19. According to Iyer, Sanskrit drama was in decline by the seventh century AD.
20. Odissi dancer Rekha Tandon addresses *yantras* and *mandalas* in her choreography, which I discuss in Chapter 2.
21. Frederique Marglin’s book was the first ethnography of the *maharis* of Odisha. Marglin was also trained in odissi dance.
22. For example, Courtyard Dancers (kathak) and Sakshi Productions (odissi).

23. A longstanding, spiritual relationship between the guru and his/her student, which involves mentoring and instruction for a lifetime (not limited to dance). It is often characterized by devotion and obedience to the guru in exchange for his/her knowledge.
24. This term was popularized by sociologist M.N. Srinivas in the 1950s.
25. There are minor variations within the *margam* based on the *gurukul* or *gharana*. For example, in Pankaj Charan Das *gharana* there is no finale or *moksha*; according to his thinking, the odissi dancer has already attained spiritual liberation.
26. Bani Ray is an odissi dancer and guru based in Princeton, New Jersey.
27. Durga Charan Ranbir is considered the foremost exponent of the Deba Prasad Das *gurukul*.
28. Coorlawala's earlier writings are focused on aesthetic and philosophical principles underlying dance and embodiment. Her later work continues to focus on issues of embodiment, recirculation of movement, in relationship to the perceptions of India dance globally.
29. The full study can be downloaded here: <http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/CaseStudy.aspx?Id=20516>
30. A *gotipua* is a male dancer in odissi; it translates literally as "a single boy."
31. Kalinga is a kingdom dating from around the middle of the first century BCE, whose domain is said to have included much of modern-day Odisha.