

**QUEER TEMPORAL TWISTS OF ACCEPTABLE INDIGENEITY:
CONCURRENCE OF *ODISSI*, *MAHARI*, AND *GATIPUA* PERFORMANCE**

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Complex Negotiations of *Odissi*, *Mahari*, and *Gotipua* Performance

Darkness quells as the silhouette of Guru Aruna Mohanty, an *Odissi*ⁱ dancer, in a tailored silk costume illuminates at the center of the stage during Orissa Dance Academy's debut performance of *Gatha Odissi: A Journey from Temple to the Stage* (Mohanty, 2013). She circulates her hands in a steep ascending curve, translating the accompanying narration in English using *Hastamudras*, codified hand-gestures, describing the two thousand year old history of *Odissi*. Janet O'Shea (2010) expands upon the use of English language commentary as verbal interlocutions in Indian classical dance to access global audiences (297). The hands remain in *Pataka Asamyukta Hastamudra*, a hand gesture requiring flexed palms and joined fingers.ⁱⁱ Each hand represents a particular historical time period or a stage in the history of *Odissi*. Using *Abhinaya* or expressional movement, Mohanty animates her eyes, eyebrows, and eyelids with subtle neck movements to communicate the origin of *Odissi* dance to her audience (Chatterjea, 1996, p. 74).ⁱⁱⁱ While staging the US premiere of *Gatha Odissi: A Journey from Temple to the Stage*, she explains the evolution of *Odissi* from the days of *Odramagadhi*, the regional dance of Odisha that finds mention in the *Natyasastra*, the ancient Indian performing arts treatise composed in second century B.C. Acknowledging the role of *Maharis*, temple-dancers engaged in ritual performance

in Hindu temples and *Gotipuas*, pre-pubertal young boys dressed as girls, as co-constructors of *Odissi*, *Gatha* juxtaposes *Odissi*, *Mahari*, and *Gotipua* performances.

Gatha celebrates *Odissi's* unbroken lineage of movement traditions passed on from one generation to the next by portraying the incorporation of indigenous performance practices of *Maharis* and *Gotipuas* into *Odissi* vocabulary. Anurima Banerji (2012) presents a detailed history of *Odissi* dance analyzing the problems of the present developmental rhetoric around the historical transmission of performing traditions from *Mahari* and *Gotipua* to *Odissi* (p. 10). I complicate this linear history that features the uneventful transmission of movement from *Maharis* and *Gotipuas* to *Odissi* dancers. Using queer time as a lens, I twist the popular version of *Odissi's* history that bases on direct transmissional lineages, mainly the *Mahari* and the *Gotipua*. According to queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993), queer “comes from the Indo-European root - *twerk*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*” (p. xii). Following in the footsteps of Sedgwick’s seminal etymological definition of queer as twisting, I find the quintessential torso twists in *Odissi* as potent sites of queer temporality.

Maharis are female ritual specialists appointed to serve *Jagannatha*, the presiding male Hindu deity of *Odissi*. Although, some of them enjoyed independent status as compared to domesticized women at that time, *Maharis* would be sexually available to the King and the Hindu *Brahmins*. *Gotipuas* emerged as part of the *Bhakti* tradition where young male dancers feminized their appearance to pay homage to the male Hindu deity *Jagannatha*, repudiating *Brahmanical* authority in order to foster direct relationship between the deity and the devotee. In the beginning of the twentieth

century, temples stopped appointing *Maharis* while *Odissi* dancers appropriated *Mahari* style as a simple addition to their existing *Odissi* repertoire.^{iv} On the contrary, *Gotipuas* continue to exist in their indigenous contexts and *Gotipua* Gurus were instrumental in reviving the dance form of *Odissi*, and tracing its lineage to the *Natyasastra*.^v Stirred by the forced simultaneity of *Odissi*, *Mahari*, and *Gotipua* performing bodies in *Gatha* disregarding these complex histories, I argue that *Mahari* and *Gotipua* performance exists alongside *Odissi* in a cyclical relationship that denies their complete absorption into the *Odissi* framework. I complicate dance critic Alistair Macaulay's (2013) simplistic review on *Gatha* devoid of historical complexity or even recognition of intertextuality in movement. Unlike Macaulay, I engage with the performing bodies in their historical contexts while recognizing the potency of movement. I further point to the potential of queer time as critiquing and subverting the gendered negotiations of acceptable indigeneity, which erases the actual *Maharis* while allowing the *Gotipuas* to survive.

This article examines the juxtaposition of movement and histories of *Mahari*, *Gotipua*, and *Odissi* performances in a queer temporal framework as a challenge to chronological progression of linear histories that account for only the unidirectional influence of *Mahari* and *Gotipua* on *Odissi*. Banerji mentions the simultaneous political and aesthetic mapping in *Odissi* as it promotes Indian nationalism in the postcolonial era along with providing the eastern Indian state of Odisha with cultural capital and a strong regional identity in post-Independence India. The linear historical narrative aids Indian nationalism and Odishan regionalism at the cost of forcefully fitting varying indigenous practices into the origin myth of *Odissi* dance failing to acknowledge the erasure of the *Mahari* body. "While *Odissi* clearly had myriad genealogies, its new

organization as a seamless and coherent entity depended on collapsing these multiple points of origin and absorbing them into a single discourse—its internal heterogeneity thus abruptly homogenized” (Banerji, 2012, p. 11).

Jane Gallop (2011), in a close reading of Sedgwick, defines queer as *tortus*, the past participle of the Latin *torquere* that is the source of the word *torture* (p. 71). I adopt Gallop’s torturous twist to queer in order to account for the actual death of *Sashimoni Devi*, the last surviving *Mahari* on March 19, 2015, amplifying the anachronism in *Gatha*’s smooth rendition of historical time. I draw inspiration from Sedgwick’s metaphor “rack of temporalities,” as analyzed by Barber and Clark (2002) with respect to performative temporalities of queer time (p. 1). Using a queer temporal framework adopting Gallop’s tortuous twisted time, I will reveal that the juxtaposition of indigenous bodies such as that of the *Maharis* and the *Gotipuas* along with *Odissi*, defies historical emplotment of straight time (Economist Staff, 2015). Sedgwick employs queer time to theorize the precariousness of the rapid aging and subsequent deaths of gay men who suffered at the AIDS epidemic of the nineties (Barber & Clark, 2002, p. 9). Similarly, appropriation of the *Mahari* body by Mohanty’s *Odissi* body twists *Gatha*’s undeviating time and simultaneously illuminates a scene of torture.

I locate meanderings of time in differential dynamics of *Odissi*, *Mahari*, and *Gotipua* movement such as that of twisted torsos differentially moving to the rhythmic meters offered by the *Mardala*, the accompanying percussion instrument. Gallop (2011) interprets Sedgwick’s “queer time” emphasizing concurrence and overlap among various irreconcilable temporal experiences: “Temporality here is so tortuous that terrifying speed can be, at the same time, hauntingly slow” (p. 51). Here, time appears

in winding circuitousness in the embodied twists, which surfaces the *Mahari* body on the eve of her death. As an *Odissi* soloist, I bear an embodied connection with the *Mahari* because both of us perform to Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda*, a twelfth century lyrical ballad in *Sanskrit* (Kaustavi Sarkar).^{vi} In an earlier work, I have addressed my choreographic engagement with the *Mahari*, in which I express my queer desire to cohabit, inhabit, bond, and be the *Mahari* in a potential same-sex bonding. (Sarkar, 2014, p. 136). Analogously, Sedgwick performs her "queer desire" that challenges the legitimacy of death as a means to thwart bodily relations. Queer desire, then, potentiates impossible experiences of time. I draw upon the notion of queer time from Sedgwick and Gallop to explain the inter-textual and inter-authorial relations between *Odissi*, *Mahari*, and *Gotipua*.

Time queers in each of the individual practices of *Odissi*, *Mahari*, and *Gotipua* that potentiates a possibility of subverting the erasure of the *Mahari* body. Often, the difficulty of reading queer time subjects the *Mahari* to her symbolic ritual efficacy in the silence, solitude, and darkness of the temple walls marking her body with suspicion, strangeness, liminality, and finally death. In a queer temporal analysis, she exists within the ontological crack between the living and the dead as the symbol of ultimate devotion in the cult of *Jagannatha* potent in her sexuality as well as her spirituality. The *Gotipuas* utilize their physical faculties for extreme contortions and bodily twists adapting their indigenous performances to cater to concert dance venues through innovative and experimental choreography. On an analogous note, Anusha Kedhar (2014) analyses flexible bodily practices of transnational South Asian migrant dance artists in negotiating neoliberal practices (p. 37). While the actual *Mahari* body faces death and extinction,

Gotipuas have grown continuously from indigenous contexts in Odisha to pan-Indian and even transnational populations evidenced by live *Gotipua* performances worldwide (Moharana, 2010). Through temporal twistings, I make space for the capacity of choreography to act as a site of critiquing the differential treatment of *Maharis* and *Gotipuas* in the history of *Odissi*. Significantly, I do not read embodied twists as purely formalist choreography devoid of narrative content within their indigenous contexts. Rather, I complicate existing codifications of *Odissi* vocabulary to decenter the *Odissi* body, distorting *Gatha*'s rhetoric around the evolution of *Odissi* from the "temple to the stage" (Orissa Dance Academy, 2012).

Applying a queer temporal theoretical framework, I perform choreographic analysis on *Odissi* and *Mahari* dance pieces performed by *Odissi* soloists such as Sujata Mohapatra, Kasturi Pattanaik, Aruna Mohanty, and Suhag Nalini-Das. Even within the appropriation of the *Mahari* by *Odissi* dance, queer time foresees a forceful resiliency refusing to let the *Mahari* slip into abysmal death. I also look into *Gotipua* dancing that constantly twists temporal dimensions through their extreme contortions and intense twists. Queer time emerges as a persistent temporality that dares to evoke *Mahari* and *Gotipua* bodies in non-linear time and compels the audience to reconsider the historically defined functions of their gendered performativity. In my queer temporal analysis looking at historical and contemporary bodies, I believe in Valerie Rohy's idea on looking at anachronistic elements strategically in order to forward a temporal analysis crossing over time (2009, 132). Being an *Odissi* soloist, I look at *Odissi* bodies by employing a middle ground between mirrored reflection and unrecognizable fragments of history. In embodying a skewed sense of time, my reading forces a

complete disorientation of the linear history of *Odissi*, resurfacing the *Mahari* in the liminal space between twisted spatial and temporal dimensions. As my analysis reveals, the relentless ambiguity of queer time opens a dialogic space through which conventional meaning is critiqued and new temporalities are generated.

Bringing together concepts around queer temporality in dealing with the issue of acceptable South Asian indigeneity in performance, I explore the gendered dimension of appropriated indigenous performance within *Odissi*, which treats *Mahari* and *Gotipua* practices differently. I also create space to nurture creative fissures exposed by choreographic works that repurpose such appropriations, and erasures. In the following sections, I analyze *Odissi*, *Mahari*, and *Gotipua* movements respectively. Then, I look into their co-occurrences to frame queer temporality as a disorienting mechanism provoking selective appropriation of indigenous practices. In the last section, I portray the potency of queer temporality as a useful tool to subvert the linear historical narrative of the history of *Odissi* dance.

The Twisted *Odissi* Torso

As the stage lights up, Sujata Mohapatra, a renowned *Odissi* dancer, enters the stage gradually by highlighting three distinct body bends in her waist, hips, and knees. Mohapatra relishes in her *Tribhangi*, the archetypal curvilinear posture characteristic of *Odissi* (Mohapatra, 2003). Her torso spirals along her spine while she isolates it from the hips engaging in a side to side motion along with a front to back twist. The twist dwells in a playful exercise concealing and revealing her torso to the audience when Mohapatra travels across the stage repeating a combination of foot-stomps, toe-points, and ankle inflections set to *Ekatali*, a rhythmic cycle consisting of four beats. She grazes

her right toe along the border of her left foot that bears her body weight. She brings her grazing toe to the front of her left foot to juxtapose the toe with her ankle while simultaneously shifting her weight from the left foot to the right foot. She travels across the stage in a straight line repeating this phrase in three different speeds followed by the *Tehai*, the percussive combination that marks the end of the entry sequence. *Dhin Dha The Naka Dhini Ta Tete Taka Dha Thi Naka Dhini Ta Tete ... Dhin Dha The Naka Dha Taka Dha Thi Naka Dha ... Dhaga Dha Thi Naka Dha Thi Dhaga Dha Thi Naka Dha Thi ... Tin Tere Kete Dha Gadi Ghene Thei Tin Tere Kete Dha Gadi Ghene Thei Tin Tere Kete Dha Gadi Ghene.*

Facing the left corner of the proscenium, Mohapatra pays obeisance to *Jagannatha* in a sitting posture. Her weight rests on her toes as her knees remain suspended in opposite directions. The frontal exposition of her torso *Jagannatha* contrasts vividly to the indulgent twist of her entrance. She offers him the flower petals carefully carrying them in her hands throughout the earlier sequence. As she supplicates in front of *Jagannatha* extending her conjoined palms to the floor, she rests her hips on her ankles with her knees touching each other. Mohapatra invokes the quintessential image of the *Mahari* performing in the *Natyamandapa*, the dancing hall in Hindu temples. The layered movement transports me to twelfth century Odisha during which King Anantavarman Chodagangadeva of the Ganga dynasty legalized the appointment of *Maharis* as servitors in the *Jagannatha* temple. Mohapatra's recurrent twists distort the history of *Odissi* questioning Aruna Mohanty's depiction of the smooth transition from *Mahari* to *Odissi* bodies in *Gatha*. My reading conflates *Odissi* and

Mahari movement onto the *Odissi* body, marking the choreographic sites of appropriation and erasure of the *Mahari* body by the *Odissi* body.

Mahari movement resurfaces through the folds of Mohapatra's bodily twist twisting time outside of linear temporal unfolding of history. History recognizes the *Odissi* body via a natural decline of the *Mahari* body. Both the bodies supposedly occupy distinct timeframes. The end of the *Mahari* body somehow miraculously blends into the *Odissi* body. However, *Maharis* were banned from their services in the temple and were violently uprooted from their professional engagements. In the twist of the spinal column, emerges an erosion of celebratory layering of an *Odissi* body with *Mahari* imagery. In the misalignments, Sedgwick's stack of temporalities that stack the untimely aging and deaths of AIDS patients refusing to resort to sequential time reorients linearity of transmissional lineage from *Odissi* to the *Mahari*. Curling of vertebrae redirects smooth temporal transfer of movement that Mohapatra and Mohanty portray. The twisted torso introduces another conception and unfolding of temporality--a specifically queer temporality.

I argue that the actual death of *Sashimani Devi* introduces a tormenting queer temporality via Mohapatra's twisted supplication and invocation of *Jagannatha*. Especially with *Sashimani Devi's* death, I refrain from celebratory juxtapositions of *Odissi* and *Mahari* movement in Mohapatra's twist. I refuse to superficially elevate *Mahari* as "*Mahan Nari*," or the great lady, while simultaneously allowing contemporary *Odissi* dancers to appropriate her art form (SandrineDaCosta, 2011). The twisting of the torso brings out torment and pain that necessarily do not adhere to celebratory understandings of queer twistedness. Gallop's attentive reading of Sedgwick qualifies

the 1991 gay pride parade in New York as a queer moment linking it to the rack or extermination camp, connoting a scene of torture (2011, p. 50). As I analyze the *Odissi* dancing body, I see deroutinizations of forward-looking history that seek the easy transfer of dance from *Mahari* to *Odissi* bodies. Mohapatra's twist introduces distortions to historical time by playing with its relationship to time. Manipulating its range of motion, Mohapatra juxtaposes eerily slow twists of her torso with sharp torso flicks. Marking the beat of the *Mardala* often in parallel relationships, Mohapatra's torso continues to uncover queer temporal twisting of the *Mahari*. Exposing its wide range of movement, Mohapatra takes pride in her graceful motion of her torso. Far from being enamored by Mohapatra's grace, the interplay of torso twists with variations in percussive rhythm invokes images of *Mahari* erasure and her subsequent death.

Sujata Mohapatra is the principal of *Srjan Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra Nrityabasa*, an institution founded by Kelucharan Mohapatra, one of the founding fathers of *Odissi* dance. As Mohapatra's disciple and member of *Srjan* repertory, I am aware of *Srjan's* style of *Odissi* that places strong footwork in proximity with a fluid torso taking utmost care to erase hip movements. Erasure of hip movement in *Odissi* coincides with *Odissi's* recognition as a devotional art form devoid of sexual innuendos and crude postures brought about by the swaying hips. I embody *Srjan's* dichotomy of strength and lyricality of lower and upper halves of the body respectively in my daily practice. The torso twists pivot around the stationary hips to the extent permitted by the spiraling spine. Accounting for stationary hips through a preparatory accent of the torso that usually precedes the beat on the *Mardala*, Mohapatra maintains a safe distance

from hip movements of *Maharis*, which in turn distances the *Odissi* dancer from her ancestor.

Within this obsession of erasing hip movement, queer temporality features in Mohapatra's twisting body moving to the accentuated beats of the *Mardala*. While she stamps her feet loudly on the floor along with the beat of the *Mardala*, Mohapatra fills the gaps between distinct beats with the twists of her torso. The torso twists redirect the temporal delineations of the *Mardala*. I suggest that the twist simultaneously distorts the directional flow of the percussionist and the inertial orientation of the dancing body. However, as each of the numerous individual rhythmic sections comes to an end, Mohapatra hits *Sama*, the first of four beats of *Ekatali*, with both her torso and feet. As opposed to the earlier lag in footwork and torso movements, *Sama* acts as a constant reorienting mechanism. It hopes to discount the queer temporal twistings of the torso. There is a play of linear time as rendered by the *Mardala* and distorted time as marked by the twisted torso, which queers *Srjan's* version of *Odissi*. Bringing this play of time within the perspective of the dying *Mahari* relates to Sedgwick's precarious turn of queer temporality. Sedgwick discusses the foreshortening of queer life spans following the AIDS crisis of the nineties as such a precarious queer moment. The twisted *Odissi* body deroutinizes time enhancing the precarity of death and erasure of the *Mahari*. I place my work in tandem with Anurima Banerji and Royona Mitra's choreographic analyses of Chandralekha, a contemporary Indian dance choreographer, where both Banerji (2009, p. 358) and Mitra (2013, p. 14) analyze temporality as changing the routine and discipline of linear time.

Ta Ri Ki Ta Dhi Dha La Nga Ta Ka Ta Tat Ta Taka Ta ... Mohapatra continues her series of choreographed movements involving experimentations with time, weight, space, and buoyancy of *Odissi* technique. The twists often instigate the shift of body weight from one leg to the other. Shifting weight overtime, Mohapatra's twist unravels her torso towards and away from the public eye. Alternatively revealing and concealing, the weight of the twist queers time within the uncertainty of layered histories present in the *Odissi* body. In the buoyant torso shifting from one settled bend to the other, either in *Prachala*, circular motion of the torso or in *Dakshachala/ Bamachala*, right and left deflections of the torso respectively, I find the uncertainty that comes with the death. Instead of relying on sharp deflections of the bust to realize the end positions, Mohapatra indulges in the transitions in-between. She lets a time-bound phrase dilate beyond its percussive limits by deploying her torso accordingly. Known for her fullness of movement, Mohapatra foregoes making crisp postures according to rhythmic patterns. In the twisted dilation of Mohapatra's torso, I read the precarious wasting away of the indigenous *Mahari* body. Mohapatra's extended torso dilations do not simply ornament her formal technique with elaborate details. Instead, it unravels the precariousness of queering time inherent in the tension between the actual erasure of the *Mahari* through her death and the conflation of the *Mahari* as a divine ritual specialist with the *Odissi* dancer.

In this section, queer temporal twistings of the *Mahari* have been identified within an *Odissi* body. In the next section, I look more closely at *Mahari* dance as it exists independently as a separate style. Existing as a separate category in various dance festivals, religious events, and televised documentaries, *Mahari* dance, in the present

scenario, often is concurrent with *Odissi* dance. I argue that it cyclically feeds and is fed by *Odissi* in its current avatar. The concurrence of *Odissi* and *Mahari* movements on the same platform queers historical linearity of time that believes in the one-way transmission of *Mahari* to *Odissi*.

Switching Being and Acting

Parsing out the anachronism inherent in *Odissi* and *Mahari* dancing bodies on the contemporary stage, my agenda seeks to foreground queer temporality as a useful lens to critique and reorient conventional readings of these dance forms. I point out that the *Mahari* is recognizable only through the *Odissi* body, either the one appropriating her costume or the one appropriating her devotion. Close reading of the dancing body using a queer temporal analysis surfaces the possibility of deconstructing conventional connotations of the *Mahari* with divinity. By strategically positioning queer time to intensify the reading of the *Odissi* twist, I restore potency to the *Mahari* body, one that wields great power as *Jagannatha's* conjugal partner and refuses to succumb to her actual death that renders her unretrievable.

Yadava hero, your hand is cooler than sandal balm on my breast;
Paint a leaf design with deer musk here on Love's ritual vessel!
She told the joyful Yadu hero, playing to delight her heart.
(Stoler Miller & Jayadeva, 1977, 124)

The above excerpt belongs to *Gitagovinda*, the twelfth century Sanskrit ballad composed by Jayadeva depicting erotic love between the male Hindu deity *Krishna* and his cowherdess-consort, *Radha*. Accompanied by Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda*, Kasturi Pattanaik, a popular *Odissi* dancer presents her rendition of the *Mahari* dance. Wearing a floral head piece, Pattanaik adorns herself heavily with silver and golden jewelry on top of a red velvet blouse bordered with gold. She portrays a narrative piece, expressing

Radha's amorous encounter with *Krishna* using *Ubhayakartari*, a hand gesture imitating the kiss in which the tips of the thumbs, the little fingers, and the ring fingers meet. Before asking *Krishna* to fix the flowers in her shining hair loosened after a violent love play, she rolls her hair into a bun using spiraling hand gestures and plucks flowers to make a garland for a decorative head piece in corresponding mimetic actions. Pattanaik lip syncs to the lyrics to depict the *Mahari's* personal sexual encounter with *Jagannatha*. Switching between characters, *Radha*, *Krishna* and the devotee Jayadeva, Pattanaik adapts to the particular characteristics of each, using the gestural language from *Natayasastra*, to evoke *Shringara Rasa*, an erotic mood as explicated by South Asian aesthetician Kapila Vatysayan (1968, p. 237). Pattanaik's evocative eye expressions explicitly communicate *Shringara Rasa* via a loud evocation of sexuality that contrasts with the modest play with sensuality by Mohapatra. Pattanaik's body often goes beyond her training in *Odissi* to resurface the *Mahari* through exaggerated hand gestures, facial expressions, torso movements, hip deflections, neck articulations, eye movements, and feet postures.

My examination of Pattanaik's performance on Indian national television focuses on the difference between performing a character and expressing the characteristic essence (Kasturi Pattanaik, 2010). Pattanaik's exaggerated *Odissi* movements improvise to the musical interludes between the textual verses emulating the *Mahari* in her ritual context. Painting contextual, metaphoric, and literal meanings through *Odissi* vocabulary, Pattanaik seeks to attain divinity in performance. Impersonation of *Mahari* devotion for *Jagannatha* as his sexual consort merges with Pattanaik's performance of *Shringara Rasa*. The in-between space of acting and being the *Mahari* is highlighted by

the repetitive juxtapositions of text and music as well as that of multiple forms of meaning. Representation and incarnation of the *Mahari* overlaps in Pattanaik's choreographic body being in a state of perpetual flux cycling back into Pattanaik's *Abhinaya* as she co-exists with her *Mahari*. The accentuated *Odissi* movements such as articulated neck deflections and crisp eye movements that characterize Pattanaik's *Mahari* performance further enhance transformations between Pattanaik's performance and being locating an altered sense of time. Looping back and forth between *Shringara Rasa*, erotic fervor, and *Bhakti Rasa*, devotional fervor, Pattanaik switches her positionality to *Jagannatha*, as his consort and devotee respectively, although popular versions of *Odissi* history subdues the notion of *Mahari* as *Jagannatha's* sexual consort. Pattanaik's performative switching lends a temporal dimension having to do with the gap between past and present within the switch instigated by different emotions in performance or that between the conflictual relationships of the *Odissi* dancer with her ancestral *Mahari*. In these iterative transformational choreographic processes, Pattanaik alters the smooth temporality of her *Mahari* performance.

Suhagnalini Das, another *Odissi* soloist, continues to exploit the writhed temporality of the intermingling of mimetic, metaphoric as well as intertextual *Odissi* idioms to perform her rendition of the *Mahari* dance (OdishaLive, 2012). She is the daughter-in-law of Guru Pankajcharan Das, one of the first performers of *Odissi* who was born in a *Mahari* family. Similar to Mohapatra's *Odissi* entrance, Das enters the stage by alternating ankle twists initiated by her heels and toes respectively. Her left hand cups as if she holds the lamp. Her right hand remains in *Hamsasya*, where the tips of her forefinger and thumb join in order to depict fire. Das transports her audience

inside the dark temple walls where the *Mahari* performed her rituals. Das rotates her wrists and torso simultaneously to imitate the rolling motion of the sandalwood on a flat wooden base to show the making of sandal-paste. In the incessant circularity of her torso isolated from her stationary hips, I find a temporal disjuncture where Das immediately orients her viewers from within the ritual context of the *Mahari* to the technical ability of her *Odissi* body. Throughout her performance, Das deploys sudden breaks in the ritual performance of the *Mahari*. She uses percussive intervals in between her textual verses in *Oriya*, the native language of Odisha denoting switches within the narrative content. Rhythmic intrusion of the *Mardala* twists the directional flow of linear time. Juxtaposing staccato rhythmicity of percussive syllables with soft, lyrical and flowing movements, Das twists time through the twists of her ankles, wrists, and torso. She switches back and forth between *Krishna*, *Radha*, *Mahari*, *Jayadeva*, *Jagannatha*, and her presentational professional self as the torchbearer of Pankaj Charan style of *Odissi* dance. *Dhei Dhei Ta Dhei Dhei Ta Karataka Dhei Dhei Ta Kita Dhei Dhei Ta Dhei Dhei Ta Dhei Dhei Ta ...*

Both Pattanaik and Das play with concealing and revealing their *Mahari*-being through twisted negotiations of their *Odissi* training. The frame of queer temporality rekindles their play with historical times apparent in and through embodied twists. *Odissi* dancers engaged in *Mahari* inspired dance do not account for her death. Within *Mahari* performance, her actual death evokes twisting of linear time through unexpected twistings of the *Odissi* body. Winding undulations brought upon by the unexpected death of the last of all *Maharis* surface the tortuousness located at the choreographic site of overlaps and differences of *Odissi* and *Mahari* dances. While the death of the

Mahari is a significant event in the history of *Odissi*, it is metamorphosed into an ideal understanding of the *Mahari* as the ritual specialist, a symbolic ideal related to the heavenly damsel, *Apsara*, who does not pertain to the karmic cycles of life and death. The deviance between the idealized and the actual *Mahari* continues to haunt the stage space of both *Odissi* and *Mahari* dance.

Primarily trained in *Odissi*, Pattanaik and Das attempt to portray an explicit *Mahari* through their sartorial choices and by maintaining the base emotion of devotional supplication to *Jagannatha*. Yet, in adapting to being *Mahari*, they open new possibilities of choreographic meaning. Seminal dance theorist Susan Leigh Foster's (1998) recognizes the unaccounted potential of choreography claiming that choreography and its analysis "leaves open the possibility for the unprecedented" (30). While switching weight on top of twisting torsos, *Odissi* bodies simultaneously resort to ritual functions of *Mahari* performance and virtuosic elements of concert *Odissi* practices. They move in and out of their performed characters alternately transposing powers to their *Odissi* and *Mahari* selves entwined in a constant temporal interplay. The transformational synapses expose the seeming incongruity of Pattanaik and Das' celebration of the *Mahari* and her ironic death. The change in movement dynamics along the spinal axis questions the linear temporality of the *Odissi* body represented in Mohanty's *Gatha*, which explains the evolution of *Odissi* dance as a divine art form that has passed onto contemporary *Odissi* dancers from their ancestors, the *Maharis*. In the twisted busts trained in *Odissi*, persists a queer moment that is infinite as well as momentary. I find a continuing moment, in which the dilating torso provides an illusion of infinite twisting. The twist intensifies and disorients the observer into considering the

fateful turn of events for the *Mahari* and refusing to assimilate to Mohanty's linear narrative. The following section works through multiple instances of appropriation of *Mahari* performativity, first by *Gotipuas* in the fifteenth century and later by *Odissi* dancers in the twentieth century.

The Contorting *Gotipua*

An array of frontally oriented young *Gotipuas* emerges from inside the wings along a straight line (Tedx Talks). Repetitive knee bends mark the downward beat of the *Mardala* introducing an accented temporality to the two dimensional horizontal contour. Discontinuous dips in regular intervals of time by the *Gotipuas* unsettle the smoothness of the line. *Tam Thei Ta Kiti Taka Ta Ham Ta Ata Thei...* Embossed in *Sakhibhava*, a Hindu religious movement where devotees connect with their religious lords as their consorts, movement of the *Gotipuas* constituting extreme contortions and distortions of young supple bodies, came into prominence during the reign of King Ramachandradeva belonging to the Bhoi dynasty in fifteenth century Odisha. Trained in *Akhadas* or gymnasiums, *Gotipuas* developed athletic and flexible bodies performing praises of *Jagannatha* outside the temple premises while *Maharis* performed within the temple walls. *Gotipuas* came into existence with the general perception of the declining social status of the *Maharis* owing to lack of royal patronage and their increased sexual engagement with people belonging to the lower castes (Kothari, 1990, 44).

Arranging themselves in a straight line along the depth of the stage, the *Gotipuas* indulge in deep splits extending their feet in opposing directions. By manipulating the depths of their splits, they create an ascending curve spatially reaching out from the front to the back of the stage. From within their splits, they bend the upper halves of

their bodies sideways until they become horizontally parallel to the floor. Each of the eight *Gotipuas* alternately bends to the right or left symmetrically, painting a flower in full blossom. Sporadic displays of extreme flexibility disturb the routine footwork mapping percussive syllables. Interspersing rhythmicity with infinitely stretched movements switch existing temporal dimensions. Playful switches between space and time result in anachronistic shifts in which one moment does not smoothly fit into another, twisting the apparent straightness of the spatial lines created by the *Gotipuas*.

The pre-pubertal boys dressed in bright red costumes with faces painted in white sandalwood paste spatially arrange themselves in a semicircle using curvilinear arm movements that imitate opening and closing of double flap doors. Suddenly they deepen into backbends. Initiating from abdominal core, they develop perfect semicircular shapes with their physical faculties. They further contort their arched backs by bringing the head in between the legs. Remaining in this twisted contortion, they stamp their feet to the rhythm and perform articulate footwork using flexed toes and heels. The side by side coming together of bodily flexibility and rhythmic acumen continues to disrupt the inertia of contortion as well as that of rhythmic time.

Spectacular flexibility of *Gatipua* bodies in twisted arrangements of limbs introduces an oblique element to the unidirectional flow of accompanying music and rhythms. Herein lies the queer moment, one that juxtaposes the systematic changes of speed, tempo, and phrasing of a particular set of percussive syllables *Tam Thei Ta Kiti Taka Ta Ham Ta Ata Thei*, with the unsystematic and sudden bursts of twists and bends.

The *Gotipuas* indulge in yet another round of bravura with a series of one-leg balances over the arched bellies of fellow *Gotipuas* in backbends. Using the strength of

their hands, feet, and core, the *Gotipuas* at the bottom rotate their bodies in a circular pattern on the floor. Their hands and feet follow the beats of the *Mardala*. *Gotipuas* on the top stretch one leg directly behind their bodies in right angles to their other leg that keeps them balanced over their fellow dancers. Balancing on one leg they now start spinning. They manipulate their ankles by employing simultaneous rotation and spatial translation in order to accomplish a full circle while maintaining the right angled one-legged balance the whole time. *Gotipuas* maintain obliquely precarious spatial and temporal relationships between each individual part of their athletic bodies and between their organizations as a whole with fellow dancers. Always being on the edge, they remain amenable to quick changes.

Providing support and having each other's back, each *Gotipua* dancer takes risk for celebrating their embodied deviations of straight lines and straight time. Walking upside down across the stage, palms and toes bearing weight of their bodies in locomotion, *Gotipuas* suddenly halt the ongoing forward motion. Rearranging themselves quickly, they portray *Kaliya Daman*, a popular Hindu folklore that ensures the killing of the evil thousand-headed serpent by the gracious lord *Krishna*. A series of seven bodies pose as the serpent by organizing themselves in arched backbends next to one another. The remaining *Gotipua* appears on top of them in a deep split. His hands arrange in imitative depiction of *Krishna's* flute symbolizing the conquering of evil. A break in the directional flow of time occurs with multiple instances of forming static tableaux representing mythical stories.

Along the vein of adapting time to its choreographic impulse, *Gotipua* performance remains relevant from the fifteenth century to the twenty-first century

although with varying support from the relevant governing institutions. *Gotipuas* emerged with the declining social status of the *Maharis* as more and more *Maharis* took to sexwork outside of their ritual activities in temples. *Gotipua* performance started being conducted in a secular context outside the temples in a way representing *Mahari* performance. However, *Gotipua* dance is a devotional exercise where the young boys express their devotion to *Jagannatha* as an incarnation of *Krishna*. In a way, the originary context of *Gotipua* performance substitutes *Mahari* dance.

Continuously supporting one another in a series of contortions and inversions, the flexibility of *Gotipua* performance translates and adapts to different platforms. While *Odissi* and *Mahari* dancing bodies remain restricted to the close circuit of classical Indian dancing, *Gotipuas* find recognition in mainstream televised dance competitions and commercial venues (Tedx Talks). While balancing bodies on one leg raising the other to the ceiling maintains linearity along the length of the body, there remains a glaring absence of sustained straight lines in *Gotipua* dancing. The young dancers flip themselves along front and back axes springing off their arms. Juxtaposed with the flips are bodies engaged in *Odissi* vocabulary, mainly *Chauka*, a square position inspired by the stance of *Jaganntha*, and *Tribhangi*, a curvilinear posture with three distinct bends at the waist, hips, and knees. The *Gotipuas* end in a diagonal line stretching across the length of the stage. Each boy attempts a remarkable feat choosing from a variety one leg balances, head stands, arches and backbends as described above. Although there is continuing interest in *Gotipua* dancing that has led to its survival in contrast to the dismissal of *Mahari* bodies, many *Gotipua* Gurus complain about the lack of

government patronage for *Gotipua* practice as compared to that of *Odissi* (TNN, 2015).^{vii}

Queer Temporal Subversion of Gendered Indigeneity

I clearly recognize the importance of time in marking regular intervals to provide choreographic cues to the performer. However, the twisted ankles, torso, fingers, hips, and knees offer potent sites of twisting the disciplining linearity of temporal flow. While Mohanty offers an essential intervention in the acknowledgement of indigenous performance practices in the formation of *Odissi*, her concept of time offers a simplistic rendition of *Odissi* historicity that resorts to nationalistic rhetoric. I argue that *Odissi*, *Mahari*, and *Gotipua* influence one another through a precarious unfolding of queer time existing as a continuing moment belying sequential as well as historical temporalities. It is undeniable that anachronistic juxtaposition of *Odissi*, *Mahari*, and *Gotipua* bodies distorts successive markers of time.

I started with *Gatha* in which Mohanty uses *Mahari*, *Gotipua*, as well as *Odissi* bodies simultaneously to show the influences of *Mahari* and *Gotipua* practices on *Odissi*. Embodied twistings reorient *Gatha*'s proclivity to linear historical time. Although *Gatha* acknowledges *Gotipua* and *Mahari* practices behind *Odissi*, it also keeps open the possibility of changing temporal directionality inflecting *Gotipua* and *Mahari* traditions with influences from codified *Odissi* vocabulary. A look into the movement itself opens up a plethora of possible temporal disorientations that complicate *Gatha*'s simplistic formula of the evolution of *Odissi* as an additive accumulation of *Mahari* and *Gotipua* performance traditions. Queer theorist Sara Ahmed qualifies dimensional disorientation by explaining the act of glancing back in space or in time. Sara Ahmed

claims that the “glance also means an openness to the future, as the imperfect translation of what is behind us” (2006, 178). For example, translation of movement from *Gotipua* to *Odissi* and back to *Gotipua* accumulate a series of gestures that twist linearity in historical time. Circling of movements across twists linear temporal reading disorients time in the act of choreographic transference and translation.

In this queer temporal commemoration of juxtaposed performance traditions and indigenous religio-ritual practices lies the unsettling resonance of the death of the actual *Mahari* body. Mohapatra, Das, and Mohanty present solo renditions of *Odissi* or *Mahari* dances symbolizing the *Mahari* as an ideal devotional aesthetic embodying the *Jagannatha* cult. She remains outside of temporal markers transcending indices that refuse to recognize her actual death and the appropriation of her performance by contemporary *Odissi* practitioners. I find it particularly disturbing to symbolize the *Mahari* body as an ideal for appropriation by *Odissi* dancers while *Gotipuas* continue to perform in their lived histories and realities. The revival of *Odissi* during the middle of the twentieth century after colonial independence does not dismiss its ancient roots and the transmission of *Mahari* and *Gotipua* lineages. Without dismissing such obvious continuity, I point towards the discriminatory nature linking the spirituality in *Odissi* to the devotion by the *Maharis*. Used as a tool for nation-building and providing the ancient spiritual core of Indian classical dance, *Mahari* and *Gotipua* performances are based on gendered negotiations of acceptable indigeneity. *Sashimoni*'s death compels confrontation of the differential nature of acceptable indigenous practices. I find interesting parallels of my analysis to Rebecca Earle's (2007) work showing how images of the Indian created by Creole elites aided the intellectual exercise of creating

national identities. In the aftermath of independence, the *Mahari* spiritual core provides India distinct source of iconography along with transnational recognition as the land of ancient spiritual performing arts. *Mahari* liveness links India to its exoticized distant past, a past that *Gatha* explores in performance.

The withering *Mahari* body subverts celebratory readings of distorted temporality prevalent in the embodied turns of choreographic analyses performed on *Odissi*, *Mahari*, and *Gotipua* pieces individually or on their juxtapositions such as in *Gatha*. The death highlights an iterative quality of *Mahari* liveness, which remains a precarious set of negotiations always experienced from the societal margins. Queer temporality as a theoretical framework intensifies, critiques, and often subverts the conventional readings of *Odissi* bodies by highlighting the contrasting features of the *Mahari* persona who is recognizable only in her absence or in her idealized presence. I undermine smooth temporal flows by surfacing conspicuous contrasts between conventional twisted movements in *Odissi* and their queer temporal renditions in my choreographic analyses.

Respectability for *Odissi* requires transposition of the *Mahari* by *Mahan Nari*, selectively appropriating the *Mahari* body in her spiritual quest while killing her potent sexuality. Queer time subverts linear temporal currents that encase the *Mahari* in her idealized devotional avatar. It colors *Gatha's* celebration of *Mahari* dance with the uncertainty of her murderous death. Tortuous twists deviating linear time create moments of nondimensional persistent effortfulness critiquing *Gatha's* linear temporal crafting of history. Sharing an embodied history with the *Mahari* and her performance, I find her death analogous to Sedgwick's queer moment. Intensification of the queer

moment disorients sequential markings in my *Odissi* practice, often breaking the rhythm of the *Ghungroos*, the quintessential bells worn on the feet that yet again mark *Odissi* as a chronological unfolding of footwork, hand-gestures, and curvilinear twists.

Anurima Banerji finds it impossible to locate the body of the *Mahari*. She notes that *Mahari* liveness is forever lost to the recesses of the past, one that resurfaces only through a queer temporal framework. The *Gotipua* tradition, on the other hand, is not a temporal fallacy. Young *Gotipuas* spread popular devotional iconography of *Radha-Krishna-Bhakti* movement. I disorient persistent temporalities of acceptable indigeneity as I seek reconciliation of the *Mahari* in all her mythical, social, and sexual complexities. I recognize the multiplicity of *Mahari* liveness as well as her death in her sexual and spiritual potency. She encounters shifting centers and is temporally unrestrictable by embodying sites of an immemorial yet current, persistent yet present, and continuing yet ruptured temporality. Is she the *Apsara* figure or a mortal prostitute, a divine consort or a mistress of the rich, sacred or profane? I juxtapose the multiplicity of *Mahari* persona and performance with her apparent physical inflexibility while comparing that to the athletic prowess and physical flexibility of *Gotipua* bodies. The *Gotipua* engages the audience with frequent jumps, flips, inversions, and balances while the arthritic body of the aging *Mahari* works on her *Abhinaya*, facial expressions depicting multiple characters and narrative content, mainly from the *Gitagovinda*. In fact, her bodily inflexibility juxtaposes with the infinite flexibility of her persona. I decenter the *Odissi* body by surfacing the potent embodied twist reflecting the richness of *Mahari* multiplicity. The death of the *Mahari* concurs with the appropriation of her body, first by *Gotipuas* and later by *Odissi* dancers. The twisted temporality of layered juxtapositions

of *Odissi*, *Mahari*, and *Gotipua* performance anachronistically awakens the *Mahari* from her erasure and death.

I deploy choreographic analysis to expose the twisted contradictions of sequential time that retroactively layers myriad historical developments to validate *Odissi's* long lineage and sacred status. I articulate sites of distorted time that intensify, critique, disorient, and often subvert gendered negotiations of acceptable indigeneity within the embodiment of twists in tracing *Odissi's* historical and contemporary intersections with *Mahari* and *Gotipua* dances. I show how the three performance traditions, *Odissi*, *Mahari*, and *Gotipua*, emerge within a queer temporal bond not only because they foster relationships encompassing multiple unconventional identities and excessively sexualized or asexualized orientations, but also because they forge a sense of omnitemporality, where the mythical, the historical, and experiences of the present become coterminous.

Endnotes

ⁱ *Odissi* is an Indian classical dance form originating from the eastern Indian state of Odisha. In order to find more about the appellation of the term *Odissi*, look into Coorlawala (1996), Kothari (1990), Pathy (2007), and Patnaik (1990).

ⁱⁱ For more information on hand gestures in *Odissi* dance, consult Dandavate (2012). , Vishnu. *Language of Gestures in Odissi Dance*. Directed by Rohini Dandavate. San Fransisco, CA: 2012. DVD.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ananya Chatterjea (1996) presents an indepth analysis of *Abhinaya*, gestural dance distinguished from *Nritta*, pure or abstract dance.

^{iv} Typically, the *Odissi* repertoire consists of *Mangalacharan* (an invocatory piece), *Batu* (shows the fundamentals), *Pallavi* (rhythmic exposition), *Abhinaya* (gestural acting), *Moksha* (salvation) as discussed by Banerji (2010) in her doctoral dissertation.

^v *Natyasastra* is an ancient performing arts treatise used in the revival of Indian classical dance.

^{vi} As a repertory member of *Srjan Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra Nrityabasa*, I follow my visceral response to solo and group choreographic works in the *Odissi* canon.

^{vii} *Gotipua* Gurus complain about how all of the government patronage has been channeled into the development of *Odissi* as the sophisticated classical dance form of Odisha at the cost of neglecting *Gotipua*, one of the primary sources of *Odissi*.

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