Traditional Dance/Mixed Genealogies: A Study in Diasporic Odissi

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Abstract:
This article reflects on a collaborative project entitled *Devotions* (2021), in which a small team of artists choreographed Western classical opera and oratorio songs with Odissi *abhinaya*. As dramaturg, I delve into the process of creating a choreo-musical language for this project and the ethical, stylistic and practical factors made among our desires, stakeholders, and extant performance possibilities. Finally, I offer a reading of our staged performance in relation to discourses that frame diasporic Indian dance today.

Through *Devotions*, I propose a framework for understanding practices of diasporic Odissi beyond the familiar binaries of tradition/modernity, classical/contemporary, authenticity/inauthenticity that arguably impose a limit on the collective imagination of the form's evolution. Instead, drawing from diaspora's queer, nonreproductive and impure energies, I insist on Odissi's existentially mixed genealogy and bring this to bear upon how we understand new works. Thus, I offer *Devotions* (in theory and practice) as an attempt at performing mixed genealogies – an act which subverts the racialized logics guarding dance's (re)production by celebrating the existentially mixed and open-ended nature of all artistic genealogies.

Key Words:
Odissi, Mixed Genealogies, Queer Diaspora, Performance Ethnography, Music and Dance

PART I

If traditional Indian dance in Singapore is tending toward death, I believe this event will more closely resemble a snake shedding its skin than the extinction of a species. Before crossing to different shores, dances born in the Indian subcontinent had already undergone stages of forced disappearance and surrogated rebirths—even if this jagged *longue dureé* history has been obscured by discourses of nationalism, cultural authenticity and civilizational heritage in which multiple stakeholders of Indian dance are invested. However, while the simulacrum of festival programs, travel brochures, and commercial advertisements may present the idea that the dance forms we know today have flowed through unbroken lineages from ancient India to the only-now fracturing present of the diaspora, there is a strange way in which fragmented histories congeal into dance aesthetics themselves. To the uninitiated, our dazzling costumes, *alta*-dyed hands and feet, and coded gestures seem to collude with our flattening into spectacle, but as one gets settled into the rhythms of this performances, keen attentiveness might adumbrate the ways that these dances—like viruses seducing, circulating, and mutating bodies in contact—also register and express their own historical r/evolutions.

For example, on the scale of *revolution*, the British's criminalization of temple dance and dance communities in various parts of the Indian subcontinent from 1892–1947 on the charge of sexual immorality has an *embodied* legacy in the dances reconstructed and awarded classical status from the 1930–60s: we glimpse it in caste- and other socially privileged actors, who, having rescued dance from its debasement, now represent it to the world; in the syncretic mixture of "folk" forms, western dance, ancient temple sculpture and aesthetic treatises in the "classical" dance languages; in the renaming of the dances,

such as in the case of Bharatanatyam (Sadir), and Odissi (Mahari/Gotipua dance); and in their sublimation of the once-maligned erotic elements into narratives of Hindu spirituality so deeply associated with India. As for *evolution*, the mark of learning from two different gurus of the "same lineage" expresses itself in divergent steps and *mudras* (hand gestures) that dancers articulate in even the most well-established of pieces, confirming the truism that two performances can never be the same. Thus, unlike bones, CDs, manuscripts, and all those materials "supposedly resistant to change" in the "archive", Indian dance constitutes a social and aesthetic "repertoire" of the intimate histories of presence that must necessarily exist through the bodies who, in their own contingent circumstances, inherited them, and in turn bring and re-bring its repertoire to life (Taylor 19).

Now, at the cusp of a (re)turn to fascism and imperialism rapidly accelerated by the United States from which I am writing, there also seems to be a renaissance in diasporic Indian dance. Of the many forces that have led to this, a dialectical pair takes centerstage. In multicultural and neoliberal metropoles, the flexible economy that proliferates gig-work and other forms of unstable labour in turn demands that South Asian dancers flexibly perform the "exotic and legible, particular and universal, different and accessible, other and not other" to access limited arts funding (Kedhar 3). Under the ethos of (economically incentivized) freedom and innovation, a wave of dancers is breaking the bonds of traditional Indian dance. Attempting to stave off this rupture with renewed force is the drive within dance communities to maintain hierarchical social relations and the aesthetic values these appear to preserve within these dance forms (Kaktikar 10). Whether informed by efforts to instill cultural identity or resist assimilation in the diaspora; by the rising wind of Hindu nationalism blowing from India; the love of canonical repertoire for its own sake or an intermingling of these and other reasons, the conservative position codes departure from guru lineage, conceptual choreographies, and experiments in "cross-generic couplings that can produce unforeseen hybrids" as harbingers of Indian dance's impending extinction (Nambiar 49).

As is becoming increasingly evident, the pressures to make-flexible or to preserve dance assemble in different formations to guard its evolution in different diasporic locations; they also cannot be so neatly affiliated with either the state or dance communities, arising as they do from complex intersections of agendas, positions and identities. However, I bring them to the fore of this paper because they represent an impasse—here—at the crossroads of a past, present, and imagined future of diasporic Indian dance that calls to be expressed both in the tradition of movement and of scholarship. I am invested, practiced, and researched in Odissi, a dance form which bears multiple labels within different artistic ecologies and economies and with these, specific meanings, roles, and levels of national and institutional support. In the 1960s, Odissi was named a "classical dance" by the Sangeet Natak Akademie (Citaristi 115), a mantle it wears wherever it goes. Additionally, it is a "traditional Indian dance" in Singapore, a "South Asian dance" in Britain and the United States, and in some corners of the anglophone academy, a "classi*cized* Indian dance."

Dancing and writing from these three different locations Odissi has traveled and being captured by its net of significations in these diasporas each time, I attempt to theorize diasporic Odissi beyond the neoliberal demand for flexibility *and* the conservative demand for preservation against predicted loss. How can we avoid reading diasporic Odissi through the well-worn lenses of tradition/modernity, stasis/change, and classical/contemporary,

and in doing so produce points of discussion beyond value judgements on *tradition, modernity, innovation, dilution, authenticity, and hybridity*? While these terms are part of a dialectic that has driven Indian dance to its rhizomatic blooming today, they impose a limit on the collective imagination of its evolution that transposes itself onto every generation. What if, to escape this cyclical bind, we were to approach Odissi from a different starting point, one which is premised upon historicity but radically deprioritizes the question of Odissi's non/alignment with its pasts?

In *Impossible Desires* (2005), Gayatri Gopinath appropriates heteronormative logic to draw the analogy that "queerness is to heterosexuality as the diaspora is to the nation"—a "debased and inauthentic" imitation of the original. If diaspora does the much-needed work of detaching the notion of queer from homonormative standards, queer amplifies and recuperates the "impure, inauthentic, and nonreproductive" energies in diaspora for celebration and use (11). Taking this to artistic production, queer diaspora challenges the presumed imitative relation between diasporic and national cultural production and a striving-for-authenticity always set up for failure. If Gopinath's reflection on her "most important" intervention is the way her theory turns upon the site of "home" itself as a "[space]...permanently and already ruptured…by colliding discourses around class, sexuality, and ethnic identity", I argue that this has equally significant applications to the temporal and spatial site(s) of Odissi's "original" production (15).

An Orissa tradition which inherits Mahari Naatch, Gotipua, Ras Leela, Chhau and other regional forms, Odissi has always been mixed from multiple genealogies. Furthermore, as the Jayantika group of hereditary Gotipua dancers who codified its repertoire in the 1950s individually took on students, the form was carried through even more unique bodies, in the process acquiring recognizable distinctions—that allow one to say, for example, that one follows the style of Guru Pankaj Charan Das and not Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra—all under the still-same name of Odissi. While scholars and dancers are learned in Odissi's mixed genealogies, we have rarely brought all the implications of this mixedness to bear upon contemporary and diasporic Odissi-making, or the discourse around new works.

In this paper, I bring into conversation the un(re)productive energies of queer diaspora and the impure and inauthentic ethos of mixed genealogies in order to reroute conversations about diasporic Odissi. I ground my exploration in a work entitled *Devotions*, a collaboration that a fellow Singaporean artist and beloved friend Wong Yong En and I undertook in 2021. *Devotions* inherits and expresses 17th-century opera and oratorio singing (hereby called "Western classical" music, for ease) and Odissi *abhinaya* or storytelling language in performance. Performed by Wong Yong En and pianist Amanda Lee, *Devotions* was co-choreographed by Caroline Chin, a theater-maker and Odissi dancer trained in Western classical music, and advised upon by Raka Maitra, director of Chowk Productions, choreographer, and Odissi dance teacher. It is easy and even strategically beneficial to call this a "hybrid" or "fusion" work, especially in Singapore which places a premium on art which purportedly reflects the nation's much-belabored multicultural ethos. However, following and expanding upon Sara Ahmed's concepts of mixed orientations and genealogies, I choose to privilege terms such as "mixed" because of how *Devotions*—like the "mixed-race body"—only *typifies* in the most obvious and spectacular manner the mixed nature of all genealogies (Ahmed 143). The project to synthesize Odissi and Western classical song, then, with all its fragmentation,

friction, quirks, synchronicities and fluencies exposed to view, is a project of mixing genealogies that has already and is always occurring at different scales in every practice, every work.

Yong En conceived of *Devotions* in Singapore—where she was born, where she and I learnt (in this order) Western classical music and Odissi dance—a place which can be thought of as diasporas of both traditions due to its history as a British colony and a point of arrival for Indian merchants, traders, labourers, and their families in various waves of migration. Supported by the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music at which Yong En studied and eventually performed at Esplanade's free concourse stage, *Devotions* refracts discourses of flexibilization, preservation/conservation, and queer diaspora as they have emerged in performance scholarship. Anusha Kedhar's (2020) study of flexible bodies is set in Britain, a neoliberal and multicultural society which has a historic relationship and contemporary parallels to Singapore; meanwhile, Aparna Nambiar's work on the acclimated conservation of Odissi in the face of its "slow death" springs from the very arts ecology that cocooned *Devotions*.

Recently, Asian American scholar Cheryl Naruse (2023) called Singapore the crown of "Global Asia", a legacy left by British colonialism but which arguably stands upon the island's long pre-colonial history as a cosmopolitan trading hub of the Malay World. Singapore thus is, and has always been, a contact zone that inherits and creates mixed genealogies—a fact which in discussions of national heritage comes across as both our fortune and frustration (Ang and Stratton S67). I start here because it is the contact of social and artistic genealogies here in Singapore that has made me as a scholar, musician, dancer, and anglophone writer, and because *Devotions* is the product of social and artistic crossings that could only have happened within its particular—and particularly fertile—"microecolog[ies]" (Nambiar 52). Finally, inspired by Madhavi Menon's (2016) concept of queer universalism, I argue that performing mixed genealogies subverts the racialized logic of reproduction that hybridity discourse transfers onto to the arts by instead celebrating the existentially mixed nature of all artistic genealogies.

Weaving performance ethnography, theory, and art-historical analysis, I discuss the devising process and theoretical underpinnings of Yong En and my exploration of forms before explicating *Devotions* as its first concrete instantiation. Our intention to choreograph Western classical music with Odissi's movement language was not fixed to a particular performance setting; instead, it was the beginning of a process of creating an expressive language – one that would be developed according to the conditions of each future performance. Before I refer to *Devotions*, then, I bring you through its irreducible background or backstage, a place for preparation, excess trimmings, and the unseen in which lives the process of discovering and deepening our knowledge of forms; the ethical, stylistic and practical negotiations we had to make among our own desires, stakeholders, and extant performance possibilities; and of deepening stylistic and interpersonal intimacies through collaborative work.

PART II

Beginnings

> "Devotions came from a lightbulb moment I had about a year ago during a singing lesson. I was studying this song, or aria, called "V'adoro, pupille". In it, there were references in the text to Cupid's arrows, and a general feeling of romantic longing. At the

> same time at Chowk, I was learning this dance piece, or *ashtapadi*, called "Lalitha Lavanga", and it also featured Cupid's arrows, and Hindu goddess Radha longing for Krishna because he was away…." —Wong Yong En, 2021

The story that inspired our collaboration is one I know well, having played at a jilted, lovesick Radha by Yong En's side in our weekly dance class. While for me, this verdant scene of springtime longing precipitated a meditation on queer desire with/in Odissi, Yong En experienced a resonance between Radha and Cleopatra's moods, both of which she had come to know intimately by her body, her voice. How does one begin to do Odissi and Western classical singing, together? In the first instance, we did not hope to "reconcile" the forms (however magnificent that must be), but only to reconcile Yong En's body to styles of expression that she already, intimately, lived—one in the lessons that she took on weekdays as a conservatory student, and the other, the bright Chowk studio on Saturday mornings. Now in the same moment: Radha's search for Krishna in the groves of the forest meets eyes that strike lightning bolts into the heart—*"Take pity", Cesare, for I cannot bear this much electricity, though the wound smarts stronger if I don't find you, or you turn away*…

This frictive process of integrating forms to body necessarily translates here on the page. As I write these paragraphs, I am straining to describe both languages without always switching between hands, and instead mirror Yong En's bodily endeavor in bringing them home and speaking them at the same time. Though the audience may perceive Western music through their ears and Odissi movement with their eyes, Yong En, the source at the center of it all, troubles stratification—even the stratification that is done as a precursor to unification. Thus, I am also resisting dividing every sentence into two clauses. (Thus writing, with its monophonic linear procession, will fall short of this and every performance).

In the early days, our intuition that there were more synchronicities between the forms than we were conscious of led us to recordings, scores, training manuals and research papers. More than any technical, aesthetic or historical correspondence, early modern classical songs and Odissi repertoire shared a penchant for… devotion. That spring, we were preoccupied by arias from J S Bach's *Johannespassion* (1724), an oratorio based on the gospel of St John which dramatizes the lead-up to Jesus's death. As channels for the turbulent passions of devotional love, these arias became the starting point for our project and the core of our performance program. Born in 1685, Bach was a fervent Lutheran Christian who made his livelihood by composing music, conducting choirs, and playing the organ in church. In the spirit of Luther's idea that music "is the *viva voce evangelii*, the living voice of the Gospel", Bach professed that the "ultimate goal" of his music-making, too, was to glorify God (Leaver 20; Geck 29). In Odissi, the paradigm for devotion is given by the *Gita Govinda*, or Song of Krishna by Jayadeva. Jayadeva was a twelfth century poet from Orissa who advanced *bhakti*, "a religious movement of popular origin centered on the personal nature of the deity's devotion" in contrast to hierarchy-based forms of worship (Gomes and Duarte 166). According to a 1499 decree inscribed on the Jagannath temple in Puri, Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* was the only text the Maharis (Odissi's temple dancer ancestors) were allowed to sing and dance inside the temple during Prataparudra Deva's reign from 1497 to 1540 CE (Citaristi 22). And around 400 years later, precisely because of its historic entwinement with dance in the region, the *Gita Govinda* was again privileged as the foundation of Odissi's repertoire. Hence, the Krishna-*bhakti* tradition in which the *Gita*

Govinda was composed indelibly shaped the style, poetics, and evolution of Odissi, as much as Odissi dance reaffirms this devotional mode in the present day.

It became clear to us that devotional love was that common, potent affect which could move a subject to singing and dancing both on the levels of the texts and the meta-level of embodied performance. But, rooted in two distinct theological paradigms, that love differed in structure, narrative, and significance in ways that powerfully shaped the aims of artistic expression and the aesthetics of Western classical music and Odissi respectively. This all the more elicited our curiosity about how these philosophies and aesthetics, devoted as they were to a shared purpose, might interact, confuse, or infuse each other in performance. Starting *Devotions* from the shared multiplicities of devotion, we thus asked how our project could honor and work with the flavors of devotional love in these traditions for an ecumenical expression. For the purposes of this paper, I attempt to unravel this question and other dynamics at play in the creation process through our work on the aria "Zerfließe, Mein Herze."

Starting from Bach inevitably situates our exploration at an awkward power geometry, given the primacy of music in most choreo-musical relations: in oratorio, all the body's resources are put in service of the song and in Odissi, *ashtapadis* interpret the content of Jayadeva's songs and *pallavis* elaborate upon the foundation of musical *ragas*. Ironically, then, it is precisely these prevailing dynamics that compelled us to start from music, and in this particular case, from Bach. But choreographing Odissi without traditional Odissi music—music literally bound hands-and-feet to a dancer's movement—suggests Odissi dance and music can, in the first place, be divorced and still retain their generic integrity. While this position deserves to be debated further, the fact is that as spectators, dancers and musicians, we have experienced how the bonds between Odissi music *and* dance have already been broken in diaspora under works that identify with Odissi's name. More than an autonomous aesthetic choice, this disjuncture could also be a result of the gendered division of labour between musicians and dancers, the differing prospects for South Asian men/musicians and women/dancers in the arts sector, and dancers' lack of access to idiomatically trained musicians and composers manifest in performance practice.

All this means is that *Devotions* is not the first work of diasporic Odissi to part with Odissi music, but neither should this decision set the tone for future instantiations. Like our beginning-from-Bach, this project too is only a beginning, and unlike the Lutheran composer, I do not believe in predestination, nor in clear-cut beginnings—as if Western classical music itself were not a product of intercultural intimacies, influences, and theft. Unable to revisit the past, we could do well to ask how an experimental and speculative approach to the forms could still bring these elements to perception. Thus, before attempting to create "Zerfließe, Mein Herze" in *abhinaya*, we asked: what would it mean for us to speculatively hear, think, and feel the aria *as*, or *as if it were already* an Odissi item?

"It wants movement"

"Zerfließe, Mein Herze" is the exquisite final aria of *Johannespassion* which proclaims the death of Christ to the world. In this somber F minor piece, the accumulated tension of the passion play is objectified, and in a cascade of sobbing figures swelled and released in the winds it is ritually purged, as the voice resounds the plea, "Dissolve, my heart, into floods of tears…" Sensing through Odissi, the song evokes a deep *viraha*, the mood of love-in-separation

that clings thickly to the Radha we had both danced in Lalitha Lavanga's introduction. In *viraha*, a sentiment which moves so many pieces of Indian music and dance, "the sweetness of possible union with a divine or human beloved is tinged with the bitterness of inevitable separation" (Chatterjee and Lee 60). Like *viraha*, the aria is long. It unspools time into a dwelling-place in which is so good and not-good to linger. Bach "understands" this—stretching out the four-line stanza that makes up Brockes's text into a luxurious 127 bars. The first two lines, "Dissolve, my heart, into floods of tears / To honor the most high" is stuttered until the persona can collect it into a sentence; to the warmer and gentler middle section Bach gives the following line, "Report to the world and to heaven the distress", which the persona also assembles in layers before the emphatic twice-made pronouncement, "Your Jesus is dead!" In a harmonically normative and formally symmetrical fashion, the first section with its two lines of text return as a closing refrain. In Bach's hands, "Zerfließe" is not a catalogue of action or development, but a melting of time into stream of affect, or perhaps *bhava* (mood or atmosphere) which, expressed effectively by a performer, may prick tongue-tips of the audience with a taste of *rasa* (essence, flavor).

Almost a century later, two towering German poets and orientalists would find an English translation of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* and appraise this precise quality of non-narrative languidness within it. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe would write in an 1802 letter: "What struck me as remarkable are the extremely varied motives by which an extremely simple subject is made endless." Friedrich Schiller, his addressee, would even consider it for the stage, only to give the final verdict that "the stage is directly opposed to it…[due to] its principal characteristic being tenderness" and the way that, because "the poet has taken a delight in spinning out sentiments with a certain easy-going complacency…it wants movement" ("Correspondence", Vol II).

Schiller's assessment interpolates historical Mahari dance as the "movement" which the *Gita Govinda* "wants" and contemporary Odissi as the movement that it would later "achieve"; but it also hails the antecedent music of Bach as sharing with the *Gita Govinda* songs certain vital qualities. While the *Gita Govinda*'s style of poetic elaboration was no longer fashionable for turn-of-the-19th-century European stage-singing—precisely due to the static nature of *both*—it recalls an earlier style of oratorio composition which was similarly steeped in the aesthetic of one basic affection (or as Schiller writes, "characteristic") according to the conventions of its own day. In the preceding century, German music that would become elevated as birthing the classical tradition was guided by the doctrine of affections following philosophers Spinoza and Descartes. Rooted in ancient Greece and explicated by European aestheticians, it attributed to music the power to arouse emotions through when artistic and emotional features were aligned. Thus, Bach's contemporary Johann Mattheson theorizes the evocation of "joy…by large intervals; sadness by small intervals; fury…[by] a roughness of harmony coupled with a rapid melody", and even associates musical forms and keys with different predispositions ("Doctrine of the Affections"; Mattheson and Lenneberg 234). These correspondences identified strategies for composers to create and sustain one affect of admiration, love, hatred, desire, joy, or sorrow in a piece.

At this point, a *rasika* or ideal spectator learned in the traditions in which we are dealing might tune in to a resonance—sounded across space and time—by *rasa* theory. Expounded by aesthetician Abhinavagupta and clarified to modern anglophone audiences by K C

Bhattacharya (1930) and Richard Schechner (2001) respectively, this theory of the Indian dramatic arts schematically links a set of *bhavas* with *rasas*, presiding deities, and colors, setting up representational conventions that could by means of performer-audience interaction ideally precipitate *rasa* (the goal of every performance!). Though Bach's aria "Zerfließe"' was guided by European affect theory of its place and time, could its expressive strategies—such as the trembling of constant semiquavers in the instruments and the melismatic text setting and descending, sigh-like figures in the voice—nonetheless be experienced as catalyzing rasa for us, *and for you, our imagined rasika*?

Let's leave this as a question for the near-future of performance and reception. Looking back, it is serendipitous enough that reading "Zerfließe" speculatively through Odissi leads us to find the very text that Odissi would be founded upon in the archive of *German* aesthetics, and to an intellectual exchange that unintentionally implies the not-yet-here dance form as a corporeal longing of a certain German music. This gives us but a glimpse of how the Western "classical" tradition, like Indian "classical" dance, is made and refined through its others in genealogies that mix ideas, poetics, and styles across space and time; how, despite the ethnic essentialism that sticks so readily to these forms, the crossings that become our project are already a hidden part of their histories which call to be performed.

The critical question, though, is *How*? Choreographing "Zerfließe", we felt the conduciveness of the aria to *abhinaya* in the way that it hailed *abhinaya*'s standard repertoire of poetic imagery: the heart, tears, flood, speech, oblation. Thus Caroline, Yong En, and I centred "Zerfließe"'s refrains around the dissolution of symmetrical, double-handed *hamsasyas* at the chest into flexed *alapadmas* descending on her body and outwards, beginning from a place of contained emotion that melts from within one's chest into a "flood of tears." In the next gesture, it flows diagonally with parallel *pataka* hands, compelling the dancer to travel its length with spread feet in *chowka* or follow its contours by placing one foot back in *prishta dhanu*. But even as the most obvious images and associations came readily from the surface of the text, we felt *sotto voce* (as an under-voice) a need for narrative movement: a thread that would like the instrumental accompaniment of this aria tie it all together.

In Odissi *ashtapadis*, "the relationship of [*abhinaya*] with the poetic text is not mechanical, but complex and articulated" (Gomes and Duarte 166). The translation of poetic word into poetic body occurs through a combination of "*padartha abhinaya*", which translates "song lyrics…into gestures, word by word" and of *sancari bhava*, a form of improvisatory movement which does not literally follow the meaning of the text but explores avenues for subtext and variation; this interplay is what makes Odissi "visible poetry"—and not prose—in action (167). Following this interpretive principle in *abhinaya*, then, we formulated a secondary narrative for "Zerfließe" beyond the poetic images it presents in the text. This is a song sung by a witness to Jesus's death, or perhaps the confirmation of his death in his lifeless body. How does the devotee register and process the death of the divine beloved, and how can their mutual intimacy implied by the musical and affective intensity of the aria be contextualized by and translated into poetic movement?

In the gospel of St John, a secret disciple named Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate for Jesus's body so that he can bury him. He is assisted by Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council who had visited Jesus "at night" to seek his teachings. On the night of

the crucifixion, the two clandestine followers wrap the body with spices in strips of linen and lay Jesus in his grave. "Zerfließe" begins from this point of intimacy with the fallen beloved: a burial. Crouched on the floor, the dancer regards the imagined body. An unnamed secret devotee finally alone with her beloved, she solemnly stretches out a piece of linen to encircle the body as her warm tears, caught by the tightening folds, seep into its skin. In performance, Yong En would begin the aria at the right stage corner, crouched on the floor or the crypt which she finishes the last of her rites. Slowly, she would rise to train her grief upon "the world", moving diagonally across the stage. Reaching its front left corner, she would eventually return to a kneeling position, turning back to the scene of her beloved's body that spatially and narratively anchors this performance. This affirms the same emotional structure Bach gives the text through his musical arrangement: the movement from a reflection upon Jesus's death ("Zerfliebe, mein Herze…")—to an exhortation to the world ("Erzahle der Welt…")—and a return to the final, introverted refrain ("Zerfliebe, mein Herze…"). Beginning with *sancari bhava*, Yong En conjures an extra- or meta-textual narrative of mourning, before slipping into the song's text through the technique of *padartha abhinaya* that translates the text nearly word-for-word. Our choreography thus reflects an attempt to stir viraha-rasa—here greatly tilted toward the bitter—through principles of elaboration and choreo-musical interaction drawn from *Gita Govinda ashtapadis*.

Finding *Bhakti* in Bach / The Dancer's Voice

There are flavors of bittersweetness, as there are flavors of love, that do not translate even under the same linguistic sign, "devotion." In Lutheran theology, the love between God and humans is *agape*, the incomprehensible, unconditional, "spontaneous and unmotivated" love that creates value in its objects (Nygren 85). The distinction of *agape* from *eros* and *filia* relies on the implicit disembodiment of love from flesh, which in the Christian context is invested with value, interests, weakness, and temptation to sin. From the time of St Augustine, this phobic attitude has manifested in profound ambivalence toward devotional music, whose beauty and pleasurefulness can misdirect religious fervor (Outler and Augustine, Book 10 Chapter 33). Though Lutherans formed a denomination that largely honored and esteemed the role of music in god's service, the church community still frequently accused Bach of this kind of scripture-obscuring musical ostentatiousness – which would show up in his too-long organ improvisations or dense musical settings of liturgical texts "darkened by an excess of art" (Gioia).

Theoretically, this means that the devotional love animating the unnamed witness in "Zerfließe" belongs not on the registers of romantic or even familial love, but to reverential *agape* which (like the Kantian idea of beauty) legislates for itself in God's awe-inspiring presence. But when set to music, exactly how this devotion is represented—and particularly how it has been represented by Bach—augurs excess, sensuality and pleasure that can stir the passions in unpredictable ways so as to even blur distinctions among love's categories. In *Devotions*, we drew out this potential by (re)creating Bach in the language of Odissi *abhinaya*, which is "used to" figuring devotional love in a different way and carries over the baggage of this use here as heterodox. Within *bhakti*, the ideal relationship between devotee and divine is symbolized by that of Krishna (the male lover) and his consort Radha (the female beloved), whose erotic union "metaphorically emulates the devotional yearning of the…devotee to merge with the divine" (Sarkar 21-22). In

this mode of *sringara bhakti* (*bhakti* through eroticism), devotion involves a pleasurable, interested, and romanticized engagement with God—which dance, music, and poetry all help to stimulate. This is why Jayadeva introduces the *Gita Govinda* with the encouragement that devoted listeners allow the music to mold their desire for the divine into the shape of Radha's desire (Miller 69):

"If remembering Hari enriches your heart,
If his arts of seduction arouse you,
Listen to Jayadeva's speech
In these sweet soft lyrical songs."

What does it mean for us to have subtly modulated *agape* into the key of sringara bhakti through Odissi choreography? If overly graphic musical representation was suspect, the act of dancing to liturgical music was unthinkable in Bach's time. Today, when dancing to Bach has become extremely fashionable in various genres of concert dance (even enjoying treatment by Kuchipudi dancer Yamini Kalluri), Bach's liturgical music still remains untouched. *Devotions* not only articulates the composer's Passion music with movement, it does so through *abhinaya* layered with symbolism and associations accrued within the Vaishnava *bhakti* tradition, with its eroticized spirituality and spiritualized eroticism.

Like most genres of dance classicized by the Sangeet Natak Akademie, Odissi is strongly Hindu-coded: its narratives are dominated by deities and its metaphors of worship—such as giving blessings, lighting a *diya* for *puja*, and showing two palms pressed together in prayer—are actions shared with those of Hindu devotees in their everyday lives. A question that emerged for us in the choreographic process was whether to invoke a different god from Jesus entirely, with Odissi's characteristic worship gestures; to lend to our *abhinaya* specific actions of Christian worship (such as showing two interlaced palms, or representing Jesus's blessing hand as a "*mudra*"); or to favor nonspecific gestures of respect, honoring, and oblation that cannot be easily identified with any god or religion. In the end, we settled on the last strategy because we believed it could best convey an ecumenical expression, allowing for a more abstract and generalizable representation of the divine beloved that did not inhere in any gender, culture, or religion. Though our sung text affirms Christianity, our movement—and the ethos under which we moved—yoked to *bhakti* queers *agape* by liberating eroticism within and for spiritual devotion. Here, the erotic not only breeds connection between the singing voice and dancing body where in both Western classical music and Indian classical dance the two are conventionally kept apart; it also infuses gestures of devotion to assert that the devotee loves not only with their mind or their soul, but with their whole body—in all its mortal resourcefulness.

In *After the Party* (2018), Joshua Chambers-Letson writes about how Nina Simone's appropriation of Bach's inventions rescues what is "minor" in this towering figure of serious music by resignifying him as a proponent of improvisation and creative freedom. Perhaps our project also releases what was already adumbrated in the church community's critiques of Bach: the way that the heaped heavy-handedness of his rhetoric and thick sensuousness of his music leads his liturgical music off the straight path and touches the erotic. As an Odissi item, now, our rendition of this *Johannespassion* aria casts the faint shadow of Radha—the archetypal, feminised beloved—onto "Zerfließe"'s vocal persona, amplifying the minor in Bach that is *viraha*. Thus, *Devotions* did not so much draw two discrete traditions "together" as it (re)created each form in the other's image, such that what emerged was more like the Odissi-in-oratorio

Fig 1 - Still from official recording of *Devotions*

and the opera-in-Odissi, depending on one's point of view. . If the multiplicitous divine's "arts of seduction arouse[d]" both Bach and Jayadeva, they aroused us in turn to entwine their creations, in the hope that this resultant performance may too arouse the audience into faith—faith in the mix, a suspension of disbelief, a certain reverent irreverence for tradition, and perhaps a prick of devotion to all their own private and public gods.

PART III

Postlude: The Concourse

In September 2021, Wong Yong En and Amanda Lee would go on to perform *Devotions* on a free stage in the iconic durian-shaped Esplanade complex that conglomerates performing arts venues in the heart of Singapore's city center. On the second floor, the Concourse sits up a flight of stairs from the main entrance, in the middle of a pedestrian's path from one side of the building to the other, from the indoors to the outdoors, from train station to restaurant, from concert to washroom. In this land-scarce country, hardly any free space goes to waste (just look at the hanging visual art installation that makes up any performance's backdrop; or, conversely from below, let the leaking sounds of the half-visible performance condition your perception of the installation)—and this central foyer is "prime land."

With a stage front indicated by parallel rows of velvet cushions, a near-180-degree view of events, and a speaker system pouring sound into stray corners of the foyer, the Concourse is a thoroughly perforated space. The Esplanade's website also proudly introduces it as a "flexible" space that platforms "talented amateur, semi-professional and professional artists from Singapore and around the world", *as well as* dance troupes, standup comedy, ensemble music, poetry readings, jazz, singer-songwriter sets, and more—all for free ("Concourse")! But as performers, we know that it is *our* quality of flexibility—the flexibility which the space demands of us—that is projected as an attribute of the space itself. No matter the needs or staging conventions of our artistic practices, we all have to fit the construction, perceptual conditions, allowances and constraints of the concourse when given the precious opportunity to expose our work.

Let us go a little further back. For us, *Devotions* for the Concourse stage came about through a series of institutional affiliations. A year prior, Yong En had pitched an original performance from inception to staging as part of a class at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music where she was a music production major. Later, a Conservatory lecturer who doubled up as a programmer for the Esplanade offered three students the opportunity to stage their ideas at the Concourse. But it was only by turning this into a credited module for both herself and her pianist, and making good on free rehearsal spaces provided by both her dance studio and music conservatory was Yong En able to devote the time and effort required to make *Devotions* possible, and to pay her collaborators equitably, instead of relying—as we are wont to do—on free artistic labour.

Flexibility, according to Anusha Kedhar, is both a demand that capital thrusts upon labour under neoliberalism and an "array of bodily practices" such as "agility, versatility, speed, mobility, adaptability, and risk-taking" that rise to meet it (1). Captured by the official recording of *Devotions*, this double-edged flexibility forms the mise-en-scène at the picture's fringe: two floor lights and a huge speaker sit on the stage platform, occasionally hiding from the audience the intricate footwork so important to Odissi, and our performance. The headset mic

which almost mocks the projection techniques painstakingly cultivated by operatic training wraps securely around Yong En's head as a necessary compromise in this noisy and unbounded space. On the right, equipment is piled up as neatly as possible—but this does not stop a black leather case from spilling awkwardly onto the short platform, suddenly acquiring stage presence. And beyond the art installation that forms the performance's backdrop, vacillations of the automatic door bordering the night-washed forecourt garden add yet another rhythmic layer to what already requires so much concentration to grasp.

Clearly, the concourse was not made for this or any particular performance, and yet it invites all kinds of low-risk, low-barriers-to-entry, and low-maintenance shows that perhaps may not be able to secure ticketed seats in a larger venue. Returning a calculation of risk, profit, and exposure, Concourse performers make do with this proliferated space. Returning proliferation with proliferation, the "on-stage" of *Devotions* performs the mixing and making of artistic genealogies, while off-stage (which is also a foregrounded back-stage), conditions by which such "talented amateur, semi-professional and professional" performances exist cannot help but break its "fourth wall".

Is this kind of coerced flexibilization a harbinger of the "slow death" of traditional art forms, and our performance part of the "genre of acclimatization and adjustment" that emerges to feed on their decay? Inspired by the same artistic ecology that nourished *Devotions*, Nambiar's article documents "adaptive moves" practitioners of Odissi in Singapore make in a climate which renders traditional dance increasingly "untenable" within "governmental and ethical regime of value" (Nambiar 45). Extending the article's ecological poetics, I read in Nambiar's argument the idea that hybridizing Odissi is a last-ditch attempt to salvage species traits, given that saving the whole species is out of the question in Singapore's innovation-valorizing artistic climate. These attempts are read in relation to loss: Malaysian dancer January Low's refusal to perform mastery of Odissi in favor of quotidian rituals of self-sustenance in her work *reclaim-in-progress* is "a pause that augurs the losses imminent in pressing ahead", while choreographer Raka Maitra's *Pallavi* series is implied to scatter, and yet also remember, "the cohesive world in which Mohapatra's choreographies (Odissi's traditional repertoire) are rooted" (50).

Uniquely positioned to write the introduction or eulogy of my own collaborative work in diasporic Odissi, I argue that here, the incentive to acclimatize and adjust our practice of Odissi was most acutely felt when we had to coax this exploration into the Concourse's fixed opportunity and space, rather than in the processual "hybridization" of genres that simultaneously conserves "what is valuable" in Odissi and eschatologically stands for its imminent end. What *does* end? If anything, only a specific iteration of the art form invented and classicized—already a powerful insurance against the ravages of time—at a node in its long circuitous journey through bodies over time. Holding on to historicity, the opening phrase of this essay, I resist thinking of Odissi as having lived only in Mohapatra's "cohesive world" (of decolonization, nation-building, and artistic reinvention, no less!); thus, I resist thinking of Odissi as dying in ours, even shores away in cosmopolitan Singapore.

In what Jasbir Puar calls a "prehensive" (or self-fulfilling) timeline toward extinction, saving Odissi as-is at the time the pronouncement of endangerment is made becomes an ideal for which conservation via hybridization is a lamentable though necessary substitute (Puar 148). While postcolonial theories of hybridization figure hybridity as the shadow of

racial purity, then, I wonder if hybridity might also always be shadowed by—no matter how impossible or problematized—racial purity's ideal.

Here I briefly bring in Martinican intellectual Aimé Césaire and postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha to clarify the way that purity haunts hybridity in the registers of race, first, and then art. *The Discourse on Colonialism* (1950), Césaire shows how in the colonizer's formulation, mixed-race children in a white French school represent the dilution of Blackness, while the same mixed-race children at a "colored" family's dinner table now represent the dilution of whiteness (62-63). Whether in schools, homes, offices, or factories, Homi Bhabha (1994) would place these girls in a "third space of cultural enunciation"—of culture, language, social, racial, and political identities—created by the mutual though indisputably hierarchical participation of the colonizer and colonized (276). Lodged firmly within this dualistic colonial dynamic, the postcolonial concept of hybridity constructs a "buffer race" in the realm of cultural production; in doing so, it continues to associate mixing and mixedness, or what it calls hybridity and syncretism, with the liminal in-between that is as cosmopolitan as it is "homeless."

The language of hybridity is now frequently used by scholars, dancers, and audiences to describe experiments in diasporic Indian dance. But what is less apparent is how this parlance may surreptitiously and perhaps ironically invite the mapping of colonial ideas of race reproduction onto the arts, where ethnically marked artistic practices stand for racial identities that meet in a fraught "third space" that is the diaspora. Following this logic to its conclusion begs the question: are cross-cultural or even cross-generic artistic experiments about saving race traits in a new, eugenically-inflected hybridity, an outcome secondary only to the faithful reproduction of race and art that cannot be guaranteed in diaspora's splintering present?

It is here that I return to Gopinath's idea that the highly romanticized and yearned-for antidote to diaspora that is "home" is "permanently and already ruptured…by colliding discourses around class, sexuality, and ethnic identity" (15). The Esplanade Concourse visualizes this space of proliferation as also a space of collision—of peoples, traditions, styles, expectations and realities. However, as I have detailed here, the performance that was elevated on the Concourse platform is only a spectacular reification of the varying registers of contact already occurring among Bach, Jayadeva, Goethe, Schiller, the Maharis, Jayantika, Yong En, Caroline Chin, Raka Maitra, Amanda Lee, myself, programmers, and Esplanade technicians vibrating across time and space and irrevocably mediated by text, time, bias and desire, even though some—including us—might sometimes strategically call *Devotions* a mix of only "Western classical music" and "Indian classical dance." Nevertheless, in analyzing *Devotions* within the analytic of mixed genealogies, I intend to recalibrate our gazes, which are so used to identifying the borders between races, to a scale of difference so granular it would draw attention to the "the mixtures that are concealed in the lines of (even) the conventional family tree"—the family trees of every tradition—and turn what from the outside appears as an echo chamber into a contact zone (Ahmed 154).

Mixed genealogies thus rests on a notion of universality that resonates with Madhavi Menon's provocative concept of queer universalism, a theory against identity politics and the essentialist linkage of certain bodies with certain desires, identities, and politics. Why and how can queerness be universal? Menon argues that "we are all marked by a

superabundance of desire that might be termed queer." The fact that we are all black boxes of unpredictable and ungovernable desires—in this we are strangely equal, strangely humbled, and universally queer. As "no-thing—peoples, events, desires can achieve ontological wholeness", Menon advocates for a politics of indifference that breaks with the overcorrected poles of identity and post-identity politics to instead see difference *everywhere*. And yet, this observation of "the multiple differences within which we live" must not function to solidify identity, but "offer…a gap between difference and identity" and negate (the illusion of one fixed and coherent) identity as an ontological basis for defining a self (20).

In the highly racialized register of lineage, an attunement to mixed genealogies compels a similar indifference to purity and authenticity by reminding us that genealogies are *performative*: they do not simply become; they are made. And so, *performing* mixed genealogies can in turn refer to a practice of experimentation that unearths mixtures hidden in the proverbial family tree, tries out different points of origin and speculates upon future connections premised upon a radical and perhaps even controversial indifference to difference—a performance of parity. It is interesting that Menon uses *theater* to illustrate the way people are capable of partaking in the decimation of identity, how we readily submit to its mode of substituting essences for roles and people for personas actualized by impersonation, identification, suspension of disbelief and play. This reminds us that the performing arts have the unique capacity to defamiliarize fixities through the contingent particularity of bodies in action. That the "eternally vanishing" performing arts are famously problematic for the archive is a reminder that performances, too, are singularities that resist being appropriated for singular meanings.

I do not wish to affirm the neoliberal drive for "freedom" and "innovation" that indiscriminately breaks existent bonds of artistry and sociality within art forms, neither do I mourn the r/evolutions of Odissi from epoch to epoch, moment to moment for preservation's sake alone. Instead, by asserting the universalism of mixed genealogies, I attempt to slip through the bind created by these discourses in order to arrive at a (in) different understanding of diasporic dance—one that inspects its veneer of coherence for already-sedimented differences that could gesture toward a politics of the future. In explicating the devising process of *Devotions*, I highlight the collective labour which made this project possible, so that you may see how the performance of mixed genealogies on stage happens by mixing forms of artistry and wisdom "backstage", and in the case that our negotiations of the artistic, ethical, and practical in this process may be useful for your own.

In speaking of Odissi's life, we are speaking of the way that *people* take Odissi on with their bodies in all their particular assemblages of difference for the thoroughly imperfect reasons that provoke them to do so and the thoroughly compromised conditions under which they do. Refusing an ontology of Odissi based in any one time, place, or body, my guess is that Odissi "is most like itself" when it historicizes where we all were with fidelity, as it tends to do with the intricate translucency of a poem (not prose!). And how could it not? To dance in diaspora is to move nourished by the soil, the heat, and the air as it is organically composed here and nowhere else. And to dance queerly in diaspora is to claim the superabundant contingency of desire and let it take you far from—while already being, right at—"home."

Note on stylistic conventions

For the purposes of publication, this essay uses American spelling and italicizes all non-English words except the names of people, groups, artistic forms and social movements.

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