Dancing Across Gender Boundaries:

Queer Experiences in Bharatanatyam Abhinaya

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Abstract

In the Indian classical dance Bharatanatyam, dancers use their body as a means to tell stories. In particular, *Abhinaya,* the narrative component of this choreutic form, provides performers with codified series of bodily attitudes and gestures through which they become any character of their narrations, moving between age, class and gender differences. While this play of impersonations is largely considered, among dancers and observes, as a matter of acting, my ethnographic work explores the experiences of a minority of social actors who perceive these performances as meaningful enactment of everyday reality. For these dancers, members of the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) community of Chennai (Tamil Nadu, South India), the impersonation of multiple characters happening in *Abhinaya* becomes a modality of crossing the cultural boundaries of gender and sexuality, of exploring and expressing identities and behaviours which are socially perceived as "non-normative". This Masters dissertation attempts to tell the stories of their non-mainstream experiences, approaching *Abhinaya* as a legitimate space where these dancers can transcend cultural margins of acceptability, as a legitimate space of agency for the performance of the illicit.

Key words: Bharatanatyam, Abhinaya, Gender, Queerness, Agency

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Acknowledgments

Introduction

One of the most fascinating features characterising the Indian classical dance Bharatanatyam, is the modality which allows dancers to change and become, to explore different ways of moving, feeling, acting and being. In the *Abhinaya*, narrative component of this choreutic form[1], the dancer is supposed to use a variegated vocabulary of bodily attitudes, hand gestures and facial expressions to tell stories. He or she then becomes any character of the narration: a king, a princess, a lover, a demon, a god. Each role is enacted through the body as the only means, without any extraneous use of costumes, make up, props or technical effects. When turning in someone else on stage, the dancer is also asked to experience and express the emotions that the characters of these narrations may feel: their anger, their fear, love and desire. Through *Abhinaya,* literally meaning "to lead towards", s/he attempts to embody these emotions in order to communicate them to the audience, at times going through all the characters of a story, exploring their peculiarities; at other times identifying with one main character, who is talking to a divine or human beloved. If traditionally the form was mainly a female soloist style, nowadays, as a consequence of many transformations, both male and female dancers engage in this performance. It constantly happens then, that a dancer is expected to enact a character of the opposite gender, or to address devotional or erotic love to same-sex deities or human beings.

From a mainstream perspective, the play of impersonations characterising *Abhinaya* is merely and exclusively related to a fictional setting. As the well-known male dancer Anirudh Knight states, 'for the majority of Bharatanatyam dancers gender is not an issue in *Abhinaya*: any impersonation lies exclusively upon their talent of acting, of making the audience unaware of their actual gender' (24/08/13). A common discourse among practitioners is that they perceive themselves as "blank pages", as neutral bodies, which are able to play multiple roles and to express any kind of emotion. However, in this context, I intend to focus on how the performance of *Abhinaya* can actually bring dancers beyond cultural boundaries of several kinds and, in particular, beyond the boundaries of gender and sexuality. As I will further discuss in this ethnographic exploration, it can at times become a tool for dancers to

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[1] My exploration based on the identification by scholar Anne Marie Gaston of three main components of the dance: *Abhinaya,* a narrative and meaningful set of gestures and movements *Nritta,* which defines non-meaningful codified patterns evoking neither moods nor feelings; and *Nritya*, the realisation in dance of both of the components (1996: 257). While this classification is only one of the possibilities discussed among dancers and scholars, it is through this separation that I was first introduced to the dance and I will therefore refer to it within my investigation.

go beyond what they are socially expected to be, to explore and express different attitudes and feelings, to move between culturally accepted and refused behaviours. The stories I will narrate are stories of non-normativity, of illicitness, of a minority of Indian dancers who, through Bharatanatyam, cross cultural margins of acceptability and act in the social reality.

What at first stimulated my reflections on this topic was a private conversation with a male Bharatanatyam dancer with whom I used to train[2]. While discussing about *Abhinaya* impersonations, he emphasised the possibility that dance gives him to cross socially fixed boundaries, exploring his masculinity as well as his femininity and to openly express his love for a man with no need to account for that. On the other hand, he told me how in everyday life, where cultural margins are necessarily more fixed than on stage, this exploration of attitudes and feelings, as well as an open manifestation of his homosexuality is more complicated, sometimes hard and painful. He said that he would really like, therefore, to bring off stage what he can experience in dance, feeling free to cross cultural borders also in everyday life. His words and feelings stimulated my thoughts on the separation between normative and non-normative social behaviours and helped me to define which kind of individual experiences I was interested in exploring. As feminist scholar Judith Butler points out, within those daily stylised repetitions of acts that constitute gender and sexuality (Butler, 1988: 520) there will inevitably be specific acts that at some point in history turn into norms, transforming thereby other acts into non-normative, "unnatural", immoral behaviours. It is to this non-normative space that I immediately linked the possibility of exploration and expression that dancers can experience in *Abhinaya*. It is for the social actors whose behaviours do not conform to the mainstream that this performance, I thought, could have a more important role. As an anthropologist, I have always found it extremely fascinating how concepts that can be perceived as so natural, certain and fixed like gender and sexuality are in fact considered within our discipline and in many others, as culturally learnt and performed behaviours (Foucault, 1980; Burt, 2009; Butler, 1988; Desmond, 2001; Fisher and Shay, 2009). As a Bharatanatyam practitioner, I practically experienced how 'the possibility of performing gender on stage could reveal the performative nature of gender itself, as well as its contingency' (Butler, 1990 in Senelick, 1992: 11). I consider, therefore, the performance of *Abhinaya* and the non-mainstream experiences of the dancers engaging in it as cultural phenomena which are worthy of exploration. How do those dancers who place themselves beyond the mainstream dichotomy male-man/female-woman as well as beyond the normative

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[2] I refer to a personal conversation I had with T. J., Bharatanatyam performer and teacher, (October 2012).

heterosexuality experience this possibility of exploration across cultural fixities? Is it particularly meaningful for them? Is it a safer space to cross boundaries than that of social reality?

Moved and motivated by these queries, as well as by my passionate interest in understanding cultural processes through looking at bodily practices, I began exploring the experiences of a specific group of dancers for whom, I initially thought and eventually understood, impersonation practices in *Abhinaya* have a deep, important meaning. Without ignoring the experiences of heterosexual male and female dancers, without ignoring the mainstream, I attempted to focus on my connections with LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) Bharatanatyam dancers mainly living in the city of Chennai (Tamil Nadu, Southern India), the city in which Bharatanatyam was first codified as national Indian dance and that is still today the main centre of its production and practice. At first electronically and lately practically, I have engaged in an ethnographic exchange with a number of homosexual and bisexual male dancers and with several members of the two non-normative, Indian culturally recognised groups of *Aravanis* (transgender male to female) and *Kothis* (men who regularly engage in cross-dressing practices). Gradually getting closer to them, I had the opportunity to approach their perceptions of Bharatanatyam as a space of exploration and expression, where both the normative and the non-normative may be performed, where prescribed and normalised behaviours may be unlearnt and alternative possibilities may be shown and communicated to people. What I was attempting to reach through this dialectic exchange and what I now consider worthy to share in writing this ethnography is nothing more than what ethnographers are generally seeking, that is, meanings.

This Masters dissertation explores precisely the meanings and experiences of a specific group of dancers, whom I now consider as my collaborators. It explores the place that Bharatanatyam occupies in their lives, as a space for the exploration and expression of the self, or a tool of communication within LGBT activism. Moreover, it encompasses the ethnographic process that over the course of the last two years has evolved from my preliminary reflections and investigations to a period of proper fieldwork in the city of Chennai and that is currently proceeding through daily electronic communication. It thus emphasises the constant changing and re-shaping that within this exchange has occurred to my hypotheses and arguments, highlighting how the ethnographic process is based on representational practices, and especially on the interaction and exchange of representations and meanings between ethnographer and collaborators. As anthropologist Georgiana Gore puts it out, 'representational practices inform all stages of dance ethnography including

fieldwork, from the conception of a field research project to its execution and completion (if, indeed, fieldwork can ever be constructed as a process with definite ending, or even beginning)' (1999: 209). After my first theorisation on the relationship between non-mainstream behaviours in terms of gender and sexuality and Bharatanatyam *Abhinaya*, I had the opportunity to confront it practically with the actual meanings and experiences of my collaborators. On the one hand, what came out of this confrontation was that our perceptions of the phenomenon were in many cases quite close. On the other hand, when the topic of my research shifted from being something logically theorised to something illogically experienced, I realised how much more complex and rich it was. What I initially planned to investigate was strictly circumscribed to the issues of gender and sexuality. The core of my ethnography was supposed to be the place that Bharatanatyam *Abhinaya* could occupy in the process of gender identity construction for a group of social actors who daily transcend the normative boundaries of gender and sexuality. The modality in which I planned to use the theory of agency as a theoretical support for my discussion was indeed strictly referred to the way in which social actors can use dance to destabilise known possibilities, 'refusing to perform the gender that is ascribed' (Burt, 2009: 150) and re-shaping their identities. However, the confrontation with a real, complex social reality, where people's actions and decisions are at least partially influenced by tangible political, class, and social dynamics from which none of my collaborators nor I could escape, made me re-consider and extend my focus. Not only did I begin contextualizing the modality in which my collaborators were acting as related to the positions and roles that they occupy in Indian society, but I also realised how the process of construction actualised through *Abhinaya* is a broad, continuous re-defining, re-iterating, re-making, re-inventing of their social reality and their places in it. Moreover, I began questioning what were the specific features that make Bharatanatyam a powerful space of exploration and action as well as what it is that makes my collaborators need such a space. What makes Bharatanatyam relevant for the exploration and expression of the non-normative? How are the gender identities and sexual behaviours of my collaborators perceived as non-normative? What are the particular features that make this choreutic form a legitimate cultural space for the performance of the illicit? My aim is now to investigate Bharatanatyam as a cultural space that in different modalities allows the non-normative to interact with the mainstream. Agency, in this context, refers to both the self-shaping of gender identity and the simultaneous self-shaping of one's place in society. I now interpret the concept as referring to people's generativity, to 'their capacities – embedded always in

collective meanings and social relations – to imagine and create new ways of beings' (Cain, Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, 1998: 5).

The following chapters explore and discuss Bharatanatyam *Abhinaya* as a space of cultural motion and the modalities in which social actors may move within it. Supported by performative feminist perspectives on gender and sexuality and by the theory of agency as that 'post-modern ethnographic tradition that sees a struggle between the opposing forces of structure and anti-structure' (Fisher and Shay, 2009: 11) this dissertation attempts to investigate the cultural modalities through which Bharatanatyam allows a group of social agents to act.

The first chapter is a historical account of the social, political dynamics within which the contemporary phenomena I investigate are produced. It explores the transformations that during colonialism occurred not only to the dance form I investigate and to its practitioners, but also to the cultural perception of gender and sexuality issues in India. These dynamics are framed within the conceptual dichotomy that encompasses the whole ethnographic exploration: the separation between a legitimate and an illicit social realms. The categories of legitimate and illicit, proposed by ethnomusicologist Anna Marcom (2013) in relation to the world of Indian dance, are here extended to a broader colonial and post-colonial re-definition that includes social perceptions of gender and sexuality. Thus, the chapter examines the social and political dynamics behind the construction of Bharatanatyam as the Indian classical dance *par excellence* (O' Shea, 2003; Meduri 2008; Natali, 2009) as well as the construction of an illicit sphere of gender and sexual behaviours that happened under the influence of British Victorian values and Indian upper-class perspectives.

The second chapter explores the contemporary performance of *Abhinaya* and the different modalities in which it allows and demands dancers to cross cultural boundaries of gender and sexuality. The phenomenon is approached through those feminist theories that perceive gender and sexuality as culturally performed and dance as a potential space for social actors to cross social fixities. Furthermore, the section displays how *Abhinaya* is associated, by both practitioners and observers, with indigenous spiritual concepts and mythological texts, which situate this dance in a sacred realm, and which, purify and legitimate its status.

The third chapter introduces my specific fieldwork experience in the city of Chennai. It describes the geographic and cultural spaces where this exploration took place, from the wealthy southern suburbs in which Bharatanatyam is at the heart of upper and middle class' aspiration and consumption, to the degraded slum areas where *Aravanis* may attempt to bring this high dance form. The electronic media through which this communication began and

remains ongoing are similarly described. Moreover, the chapter delineates my methodological approach to the field and introduces the three main groups of social actors with whom I had the opportunity to collaborate: the traditional communities of *Aravanis* and *Kothis* and the homosexual and bisexual dancers belonging to the LGBT community of Chennai and involved in a network of Queer[3] activism.

The fourth, and last, chapter explores and discusses the experiences of my collaborators, their personal modalities of acting and shaping themselves through *Abhinaya*. It attempts to describe and share what this performance can really mean for them, in their daily life as well as in the specific choreographies which they decided to share with me. Their movements and their voices have in this part of my dissertation an essential role. This is the section that constitutes, indeed, the core of the whole ethnographic process, the centre of the whole ethnographic exploration: the moment in which the voices that I consider worthy to listen to, can finally speak, and the bodies that I consider worthy to observe, can finally move.

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[3] The term, that was once as much a slang for "homosexual" as a word with homophobic acceptation, has successively become an open and elastic umbrella term which can define every conceptualization in term of gender and sexuality that is not included in the normative dichotomy male-man, woman-female (Prosser, 1996: 309). A part from indicating a widespread activist movement, Queer also refers to an academic post-structuralist theory that emerged in the early 1990s out of the field of Gay and Lesbian studies. The theory proposes an understanding of sexuality and gender which emphasizes shifting boundaries, ambivalences and approaches gender identity as a 'multiple, unstable and fluid social construction' (Yep 2004: 30) depending on the historical and cultural context.

1. Legitimate and illicit cultural spaces: a historical account

In order to proceed with an investigation of the Indian classical dance Bharatanatyam as a cultural space of connection between mainstream and non-normative realms, it seems to me necessary to first explore the social, political and historical dynamics that define normative and non-normative spaces and distinguish them. What are the discourses that, in the specific context of my investigation simultaneously make Bharatanatyam a legitimate, high level dance style, and the gender identities and sexual behaviours characterising my collaborators part of an illicit, non-normative reality? In this chapter, I assume the marking proposed by Morcom of colonial and post-colonial period as the relevant historical contexts in which a separation between Indian legitimate and illicit cultural spaces and behaviours was constructed and fixed. As the scholar puts it, 'colonial history remains relevant in terms of the ways in which it has determined the configurations and power structures of the present' (2013: 16). Her exploration of the political and historical dynamics that within these contexts created a legitimate world of Indian performing arts and its illicit opposite, is in this chapter extended and connected to the separation between legitimate and illicit spheres in terms of gender and sexual behaviours. The oppositional terms that she uses to define different realms of Indian performing arts as well as different social groups of practitioners, seem to be quite appropriate to define, at the same time, spaces of moral and immoral sexual behaviours, normative and non-normative gender identities that during colonialism were constructed and fixed. In particular, what I attempt to underline within this historical exploration is how the political discourses that constructed Bharatanatyam as a legitimate, traditional choreutic style, as the Indian classical dance *par excellence,* are strictly linked and part of the broader re-imagination of gender and sexuality that happened under colonial and upper caste nationalist frameworks (Krishnan, 2009: 378). The construction of the ideal figure of man and the perfect image of woman as well as the strengthening of the heteronormative patriarchal system happening under British Victorian morality (Vanita, 2005, Krishnan, 2009; Morcom, 2013), affected not only the transformation of the choreutic form itself as well as the re-imagination of the ideal male and female dancer, but also, the general re-configuration of Indian concepts of gender and sexual morality and the related dynamics of inclusion and exclusion.

The following sections attempt to highlight how the detachment of Bharatanatyam from an immoral erotic social group of female dancers, the attempt to "clean" *Abhinaya* from its erotic features, the invention of the figure of a masculine, virile male dancer in opposition to

the traditional female impersonators and the declaration of same-sex sexual acts as immoral and illegal are all part of the same process of fixation, part of the same nationalist, post-colonial discourses. This chapter proceeds with a historical exploration of these cultural dynamics and the modalities in which they made, and currently maintain, Bharatanatyam a legitimate cultural space, and any non-heterosexual behaviours or gender identity that is not included in the dichotomy male-man/female-woman, an immoral, illicit phenomenon.

1.1 Bharatanatyam: the Indian classical dance *par excellence*

On the occasion of the first Indian National Dance Seminar, an event that took place in 1958 in the city of New Delhi, scholar and critic V. Raghavan first defined Bharatanatyam as the 'Indian national dance *par excellence'* (1958: 26 in Meduri, 2008: 232). In the attempt to understand the complexity of the cultural processes that placed this dance form on its elevate position, we should briefly go through the social, historical pattern of its formation.

This takes us back to the 1930s colonial city of Madras (today Chennai, Tamil Nadu, South India), a geographical and political context in which the choreutic form *Sadir Kacheri*, was re-invented and codified as the classical, traditional, Indian high art nowadays known as Bharatanatyam (Allen, 1997; Meduri, 2004; Krishnan, 2009; Natali, 2009; O'Shea, 2007). The *Sadir Kacheri,* more ancient predecessor of the form as currently known, was previously mainly performed by the hereditary community of the *devadasi,* temple dancers at the service of the deities (Srinivasan, 1985; Kersenboom, 1987; Kay Jordan, 1989; Meduri, 2004; O'Shea, 2007; Natali, 2009; Soneji 2012). These women were socially considered to be married with specific gods or goddesses and their ritual marriage used to be seen as a legitimate mark of their celibate or unmarried social status. Their particular role, however, did not deny them to engage in social activities such as economic management, sex and child-bearing (Srinivasan, 1985: 1869). Indeed, unlike most Indian women in that specific context, they had considerable economic and sexual autonomy (Vanita, 2005: 76). Dance was the means through which they used to worship their divine consorts, expressing, as typical of *Bhakti* (the Hindu kind of devotion), 'the erotic desire of union with the divine' (Hanna 1988: 105). They were, at that time, together with the male exponents of their social group, the only subjects who had access to the knowledge and the practice of the *Sadir Kacheri*. In addition to their ritual activity in the temple, their performances were often required at the courts or within private celebrations. In particular, a quite active site of dance production in pre-colonial time, was the 19th century's Tanjavur court of king Serfoji II, where the well-known

"Tanjavur Quartet", a group of four compositors and musicians, first systematized the court dance tradition and the *Sadir Kacheri* repertoire as it is generally still transmitted today (O'Shea, 2007; Krishnan, 2009; Natali, 2009; Soneji, 2012).

Relevant changes occurred during English Colonialism, when the non-domestic life style of the *devadasi,* largely considered as prostitution, as well as their erotic dance were declared immoral (O'Shea 2007: 4). As Morcom points out, 'as modernity, nationalism, and colonial and bourgeois morality began to sweep definitively across India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, performing arts changed radically' (2013: 11). A series of colonial policies and "purity" campaigns known as *Anti-Nauch* (anti-dance) marked the status of the dancers and their sensual, erotic dance, as illegal, immoral, illicit. These acts marginalised the social group of temple dancers and opened the way for the entry of high social class groups into performing arts, as well as for the re-definition, re-construction and re-configuration of the choreutic form. *Bharatanatyam* is therefore the result of Indian upper-class exponents' attempt to re-establish *sadir'*s dignity, dissociating it from the ritual dancers system and their immoral, illicit world, as well as from their erotic style of movement and associating it with an ancient pure past, symbolised by ancient Sanskrit and Tamil texts (Allen, 1997; O'Shea, 2007; Krishnan, 2009; Natali, 2009). The dance form that from an Orientalist, nationalist perspective symbolised a supposed degraded and corrupt Indian historical phase was re-invented and connected to what was considered as the cultural culmination of Indian civilization: the age of Veda and big drama treatises, the glorious Aryan[4] past (Sinhal, 1995: 20). The figure whom, as scholars generally propose, we may identify as the main actor in this project of "purification" and reconstruction is indeed an high-class Indian woman, the well-known Rukmini Arundale Devi (Allen, 1997; Krishnan, 2009; Meduri, 2004; O'Shea, 2007; Natali, 2009). Coming from a family background deeply involved within the Orientalist-Nationalist political activity, she practically re-formed and re-shaped the dance that since that moment would become the national and transnational symbol of a pure, ancient Indian cultural civilisation. Learning the form from some *devadasi* she managed to connect with, she then remodelled it putting emphasis on the technical component, the perfection of the shape and the lines of the body (O'Shea 2007: 40). By contrast, while reshaping the narrative, expressive component of the dance, the *Abhinaya*, she attempted to remove the erotic attitude that characterised it. Devi thus created a new version of *Abhinaya*,

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[4] The term of Sanskrit origin, literally meaning "noble", or "pure" was in the Indian colonial context used to indicate a white population who in ancient times conquered India and subjugated the black, native Dravidian population.

as a form of storytelling, where the dancers play different gender roles but the performances of gender consist more in gestural suggestions than real impersonations and where any expression of love has a more strictly devotional feature. These transformations allowed the distancing from the "corrupt" social group of non-normative women and their choreutic form. Thus, within the so-called "revival", nationalist and colonial discourses of "purifying" performance arts, transformed "immoral eroticism" in sacred and devotional love, re-inventing *Sadir Kacheri* as a pure, non-immoral Indian tradition (O'Shea, 2003: 178). At the same time, as ethnomusicologist Matthew Harp Allen points out, the hereditary community of *devadasi* dancers was replaced by a new community of upper-caste dancers' (1997: 65), a thing that transformed the choreutic style in a dance of high social level. Thus, the widespread popularity of Bharatanatyam today as an elite hobby and an amateur theatre art dates back to this historical context (Srinivasan, 1985: 1869).

Bharatanatyam, the post-colonial focus of my investigation, is therefore the classical dance that, as Marcom proposes, at some point in the history was marked as legitimate, in contrast with the dance of the *devadasi* and a large number of other forms characterised by a more erotic style of expression and marked, therefore, as illicit (2013: 12). It became the Indian classical dance *par excellence* on both a national and a transnational level, a morally pure and technically elevate high art, in opposition with what was classified as "folk" or "popular". What remained to those "illicit" groups of practitioners, which includes, as we will further investigate in the next section, also the figure of the female impersonator, is this lower, immoral, unseen world of dance. As Morcom underlines, 'the "evil" of nauch was not eliminated […] it went underground, involving far more prostitution, less "choice" and a lower status of the women involved: the "death" of the courtesan tradition was the birth of the illicit realm of performing art' (2013: 41). Although some *devadasis* have been carefully selected, because of their special choreutic skills, by the world of Chennai's elites to become 'representatives of tradition and heritage in nationalist imagination' (Soneji, 2012: 224). these are only exceptional cases. The majority of these women became invisible, disappearing in an illicit survival space. Their dance, focused on an sensual expression of love, more than on the perfection of the lines, did not fit anymore with the sacredness and the complex technique and repertoire of the new mainstream Bharatanatyam, which had been re-oriented on aesthetic parameters by Brahmin propriety (Soneji, 2012: 223). Therefore, even if some hereditary styles continued somehow to be practised and transmitted by family groups, like the Pillai lineage from the Tanjavur district, represented by the well-known figure of the dancer Balasaraswati, her daughter, and her grand-son Anirudh Knight, the form created and

spread by Rukmini Devi has become the mainstream style currently known as Kalakshetra and taught both on a national and a transnational level (O'Shea, 2007; Meduri, 2008).

While the historical pattern of inclusion/exclusion touching different social groups of women in relation to this dance, has been well explored and investigated, what still remains generally untold is how colonial reforms changed the dynamics of male participation in the performance and transmission of *Sadir Kacheri/Bharatanatyam*. These specific dynamics are in fact essential moments in the creation of the cultural phenomena on which my investigation is focused. They must, therefore, be touched and explored in order to proceed with this attempt of understanding the contemporary use of the legitimate form Bharatanatyam by illicit groups of dancers.

1.2 Normative and non-normative images of the male Bharatanatyam dancer

As reported by several scholars (Srinivasan, 1985; Allen, 1997; Krishnan, 2009; Marcom, 2013), men used to have an essential role within the performance and transmission of what was known as *Sadir Kacheri*. In pre-colonial settings, when the *devadasi* were still the main bearers of the choreutic form, the male members of their same social group were normally trained as musicians, dance-masters and teachers (*nattuvanars*). They were thus responsible for the transmission and the preservation of the form. However, what generally remains untold within historical explorations, is the traditional role of male subjects as actual performers. As Krishnan underlines in his study on this subject, while the female *devadasis* were the exclusive performers of the ritual dance in temples, men happened to perform on more secular contexts like the court and private functions in homes (2009: 380). The silence related to their figures is probably connected to the fact that, as the scholar points out, 'the dance style repertoire itself was gendered and male performers usually employed the modality of gynemimesis in their performances' (2009: 378). This specific feature seems to be something not really proper to associate with a high level classical style like Bharatanatyam. The ideal of female grace and male national strength that the dance was supposed to embody after the revival, was probably not well represented by the liminal figure of the female impersonator, who was, sometimes only on stage, sometimes also in daily life, between the culturally recognised, acceptable, "natural" categories of male and female. The changes that occurred to the participation of men within the form during colonial and post-colonial period better highlight the reasons of this silence. Also in this case, the exploration of historical patterns of transformation deals with dynamics of inclusion and exclusion related

to the creation of a legitimate and illicit figure of male performer under colonial, upper-caste, Victorian discourses.

At the time of the anti-nauch campaigns, when female temple dancers were stigmatised and consequently replaced by high class women, the same happened with female impersonators. While men's role as musicians and teachers remained almost unchanged, the figure of the male dancers in female clothes was officially declared inappropriate for the form. As Marcom suggests, while nationalist discourses directly stigmatised the *devadasis* as prostitutes and therefore not performers, the sexuality of female impersonators was far too taboo to be attacked. This is the reason why nationalists appealed to discourses of "realism" of the enactment, instead of directly expressing the actual homophobic idea of "naturalness" to which they associated those subjects (2013: 16). They became, however, like the *devadasi*, part of an illicit sphere of performing arts, as well as an illicit social group. Their place in the performance of the dance form was replaced by the new 'figure of the male dancer as a hypermasculine, spiritual and patriotic icon for the emergent new nation (Krishnan, 2009: 378). This was the image of the nation that Bharatanatyam should have transmitted, and not the one of effeminacy, that, as historian Mrinalini Sinhal maintains, 'embodied these notions about the decline and degeneration of contemporary India (1995: 20).

While female impersonators ended to be perceived as unnatural and immoral, the image of the Bharatanatyam male dancer started to be nationally and transnationally recognised. The introduction of a male performer in the re-codification of the form largely affected the modality in which it was modiefied and that still characterises it today. As previously illustrated, the "purification" process through which *Sadir* was transformed into Bharatanatyam was an attempt to make it erotically neutral and thus suitable for both female and male performers. Devi refined and reinforced the technical part of the choreutic style, partially reducing its "feminine feature". Similarly, while the *Abhinaya* became in Kalakshetra style mainly a sort of storytelling, the traditional pieces, expressing erotic love (*shringara*) for male subjects, that continued to be taught and transmitted, began to be performed only by female dancers. Kalakshetra style male dancers were instead expected to perform exclusively devotional *Abhinaya* pieces, as men who express, through dance, their devotional desire of becoming one with god. As I had the opportunity to observe during my four years of practice and especially with my fieldwork experience in Chennai, it is still nowadays really unlikely for male dancers to perform traditional *Shringara* (erotic) *Abhinaya* pieces. It would be seen as an expression of non-normative, illicit gender and sexual behaviours. One of my collaborators, a male dancer who was born in the U.S.A and moved to

India only at the age of 18, explained me that 'in Chennai male dancers don't want people to think that they are gay and they know that if they decide to perform a very feminine piece everybody will gossip afterwards' (Kiran, 11/08/13). It often happens therefore, especially among the homosexual and bisexual group I met, that dancers choose to detach themselves from the mainstream Kalakshetra style and the related expectations that teachers and audience have on them. Like in the cases of my collaborators Aniruddhan, Taejha and S.J., dancers may decide to approach some of the hereditary styles that did not completely assume the new erotically, sexually and gender purified version of *Abhinaya*. Some of them may even decide to engage in more sensual type of Indian forms like, for instance, *Mohiniyattam*, a very graceful dance form usually meant to be performed only by women.

At the same time, in the contemporary field of Indian performing arts, female impersonators, associated with the social figures of *Hijra* or *Aravanis* (transgender male to female) and *Kothis* (male who regularly engage in cross-dressing activities), are not considered as part of the classical, legitimate realm of dance, but only of the low, folk or popular ones. *Aravanis* communities are currently placed out of the mainstream society and from their particularly low social position usually engage in folk performances to earn a living. *Kothis*, regular men in daily life, engage in sensual, erotic performances only when they secretly dress up as women. From their social realities, these subjects rarely have the opportunity to access a classical dance such as Bharatanatyam. The contemporary social position of these groups is thus strictly related to the specific historical moment in which, as dance scholar Anthony Shay points out discussing Krishnan's study, 'local male dancing traditions have been replaced to fit into colonial or nationalist agendas dictating macho representations of masculinity that came from the West' (2009: 15). The dynamics of illusion and exclusion that under British Victorian misunderstanding created a legitimate and an illicit figure of male dancers, are therefore extremely related to issues of gender and sexual morality. What, as a consequence of these political dynamics, a man can or cannot do in dance and especially in *Abhinaya* is very closely related to the contemporary experiences of my collaborators. Moreover, their position in Indian society is defined by those social perspectives on normative and non-normative gender identities and sexual orientation, that, as explored in the following section, are part of the same colonial and post-colonial process of construction.

1.3 Normative and non-normative gender identities, moral and immoral sexual behaviours

As previously explored, the construction of a fixed ideal of Indian man and woman by colonial, nationalist discourses, established the clear-cut dichotomy male /female as the only "natural" acceptable possibilities in terms of gender identity. As a consequence, traditionally recognised social subjects like *Aravanis* began to be marked as cultural "unnatural" exceptions. Psychoanalyst Ashis Nandy not only connects these changes to colonial policy but maintains that pre-colonial India was characterised by a more fluid organisation in terms of gender and sexuality, represented by the concept of "gender fluidity" (1988, in Leslie and Mc Gee, 2000: 35). While the perfect images of womanliness and manhood were depicted as the only natural gender categories within the parameters of acceptability of Indian culture, also their union was established as the only possibility of human erotic relationship. In 1860, British colonialists introduced Section 377 in the Indian Penal code, a set of laws that criminalised any type of consensual sex acts other than penile-vagina penetrative sex, as 'carnal intercourses against the order of nature' (Indian Penal Code, 1860). Even if the section potentially penalises also non-penetrative sexual practices among heterosexual couples, it has been mainly connected to same-sex relationships (Misra, 2009: 21). Although this set of laws, as the executive director of the activist group CREA[5] Gitanjali Misra observes, does not act practically on these sexual minorities, it implicitly influences the way in which they are marginalized in society (2009: 21). The introduction of section 377, can therefore be considered as part of that colonial and post-colonial process that established a dichotomy between legitimate and illicit sexual behaviours. The same cultural discourses that placed the so-called people of the "third gender" (Sharma, 2012), those social figures transcending the normative dichotomy, in an illicit, liminal realm, at some point in the history criminalised non-heterosexual acts and relationship as "unnatural", immoral, wrong and illegal.

The investigation of these historical patterns is essential in order to proceed with my exploration, since they placed the main social groups involved in my ethnographic process in a cultural space of immorality and abnormality. Section 377 of the Penal Code is in fact currently still active, together with the homophobic dynamics of marginalisation it produces. In July 2009, in response to years of political activism and protests all over the country and especially by the Naz Foundation India Trust (Misra, 2009), the Delhi High Court overturned

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[5] Founded in 2000, CREA, is a feminist human rights organization based in New Delhi, India

the old set of laws. However, three years later, in December 2013, the Supreme Court of India chose to re-introduce the section, declaring homosexuality and other types of "inverted behaviours" in relation to gender and sexuality as immoral, unnatural, against Indian traditional values and, consequently, punishable by law (ORINAM, 2013). In contemporary India, LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) subjects are therefore living their lives and their love relationships as criminals, everyday acting against the law, against what has been constructed as the natural behaviour, the norm.

The colonial introduction of section 377 under British Victorian morality, created the ground for the adoption by Indian subjects of the Western concept of homosexuality as an identity mark. As Misra points out, it inspired debate and discussions among Indians who had no previously considered sexuality issues and a consequent network of LGBT activist across the country (2009: 20). These dynamics contributed to the development of the common consideration, still popular nowadays, of same-sex relationships as a western import, that was not present in pre-colonial India. As feminist scholar and activist Ruth Vanita underlines, the lack of South Asian pre-modern history of persecuting people for same-sex relationships (2005: 11), has been largely translated in the nonexistence of actual homoerotic behaviours in the past. By opposite, the scholar marks the 19th century as the period in which homophobia and not homosexuality was introduced (2005: 30). Although in the field of academia and LGBT rights we can currently find general agreement about the existence of queer dynamics in pre-colonial India, even if with different forms or names (Vanita, 2001: 1), these behaviours are still largely considered as immoral, unnatural, western phenomena.

This is the context in which the social experiences of my collaborators take place. Their gender identities or sexual orientations, make them part of an illicit social reality. There are those who identify with traditionally Indian gender alternate identities like *Aravanis* and *Kothis*, and there are those who identify with originally western concepts like LGBT or queer. As Marcom puts it, 'although the division overlaps in practice, msm [men who have sex with men] transgender and sexual minorities in South Asia can broadly be divided into *Hijra* [*Aravanis* in South India], who are highly visible and well-known; *Kothis* who are not identified or visible as a group and are known about only in certain circles; and gay and bisexual in a more western sense (2013: 89). As we will have the possibility to explore within this ethnographic work, their position and identification within one of these groups strongly influences their need and possibility of agency and therefore the meaning they give to the cultural border-crossing happening in *Abhinaya*. What is common to their experiences is that Bharatanatyam, as the Indian classical dance *par excellence*, becomes for them a space of

connection to the mainstream. Proceeding with the investigation of the cultural processes that will eventually lead us to the exploration of their individual meanings, the next chapter introduces the narrative component of Bharatanatyam, the *Abhinaya*, in its contemporary form, and discusses, through feminist and anthropological perspectives, how it lends itself to the exploration of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, it explores the modalities in which, the association of *Abhinaya* with traditional epic and mythology and, through them, with indigenous spiritual perspectives, sacralises and legitimises the gender dynamics characterising the form, transforming it in a safe space for the performance of the non-normative.

2. Contemporary *Abhinaya*: a choreutic space of agency

> *Performances mark identities, bend and remake time, adorn and reshape the body, tell stories, and provide people with the means to play with the worlds they not only inhabit but to a large degree construct.*
>
> Schechner (2002: 162)

This section of the dissertation investigates the performance of *Abhinaya* as a place of exploring, re-thinking, re-inventing, re-shaping social actors' identities and worlds. While the previous chapter focused on the political discourses that make Bharatanatyam a legitimate cultural space of action, I here explore the possibility of motion between cultural boundaries that this dance style, on a strictly choreutic level, provides social actors with. Through the exploration of the different manners in which *Abhinaya* lends itself to the enactment of gender attitudes and feelings, I attempt to provide the reader with an essential base for the understanding of what my collaborators could experience in it. The shifting between gender roles and their socially stereotyped bodily attitudes, the experience and expression of feelings as someone else may do, represent the choreutic ground for their social agency.

On the one hand, based on 'a performative theory of identity as a work-in-progress, an ongoing out-come in a process of ongoing production' (Burt, 2001: 308) this chapter approaches *Abhinaya* as a potential space where dancers can construct their identity. On the other hand, assuming that the possibility of performing gender in dance may highlight the performative nature of gender and sexuality themselves, and thus, their instability and changeability (Butler, 1998; Burt, 2001; Shay, 2009), *Abhinaya* is here explored as a potential tool used by the dancers to stimulate people's thoughts and reflections on the nature of those phenomena.

My aim is therefore to introduce this performance as a space where the borders of normative and non-normative in terms of gender and sexuality can be crossed and destabilised, within a social reality in which they tend to be more rigid and fixed. Dance becomes in this context a much safer and fluid space that everyday life can be, since, as Judith Butler maintains, 'non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions' (1988: 527). Furthermore, I attempt to underline how the religious and mythological texts upon which *Abhinaya* is built and the indigenous spiritual and philosophical concepts they maintain, support and re-enforce, as traditional perspectives,

the legitimacy of this borders-crossing. Conceiving a more fluid concept of gender than a clear-cut dichotomy male/female, these perspectives work as a legitimate support for my collaborators' identities and behaviours in a dualistic post-colonial reality. Therefore, the choreographic possibilities on which this chapter focuses, become spaces of agency not only because partially detached from the reality, but also because they are supported by the power of tradition. In *Abhinaya* performances, social actors can adorn and reshape themselves, tell their stories and their worlds, and attempt to change them.

2.1 Moving across gender boundaries

In the contemporary repertoire of Bharatanatyam, and especially in connection to the re-vision and codification of it made within the revival, *Abhinaya* is generally presented as belonging to a sort of storytelling, in which the dancers narrate through their bodies episodes from the big corpus of Hindu epic and mythology. They become any character of the story, switching from the representation of a male character to the representation of a female one, using the means of bodily narrations provided by the *Abhinaya*: hand gestures (*hasta mudras*), stereotyped gender attitudes, facial expressions. As performance scholar Avanthi Meduri fittingly observes, 'the Indian classical performer is a "perhaper", a self-styled magician playing at everything without inhabiting any one space exclusively' (2003b: 191). The specific vocabulary dancers are provided with is made of peculiar attitudes and gestures which, although part of a culturally recognizable code, have been further refined and codified for representational uses (Senelick, 1992: 10). In particular they express gender in an emphasised, stereotyped manner. In addition the bodily vocabulary of *Abhinaya*, dancers are constantly supported by the choreutic patterns characterising the technical component of Bharatanatyam, the *Nritta*[6]. Also those movements that are not specifically meant to be involved in the impersonation of a character and therefore in the performances of gender, are indeed gendered. As Judith Lynne Hanna observes, 'males and females have different dance styles, the virile *tandava* and the gentle *lasya* […] respectively as *Siva* and his consort *Parvati* […] nevertheless both styles are cultivated by dancers of each sex' (1988: 103). The performance of femininity and masculinity is thus built on the emphasis of their culturally constructed features, which facilitates the understanding by an audience of the switching of

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[6] As previously specified, *Nritta* is the term used to define the non-narrative part of Bharatanatyam. It consists in codified combinations of non-meaningful movements, which however can be used as a support in the mimic expression of *Abhinaya*.

gender roles constantly happening within the narration. However, dancers sometimes use specific additional element which help them to clearly show the shift from one character to another, like for instance the typical semicircular clockwise and anti-clockwise movement called *palta,* which means indeed "to switch" (Shah, 1998: 4). Turning their bodies, they flow across gender, age levels, personality and emotional moods of several characters, they flow across culturally fixed boundaries.

One could easily say that this exploration is nothing more than acting, nothing more than learning new codes of gestures and using them to represent different characters. *Abhinaya* could easily be perceived merely as a matter of talent at acting. As afore mentioned, the majority of the dancers I met or I read about, speak of this impersonation in term of neutrality of the body, artistic talent to become someone else only for a short moment. However, while this may be the case for several dancers, in my collaborators performances, there are particular characters, particular roles, particular moments that they want to last longer, spaces that they don't want to leave but bring with them in their everyday life. In a social reality that is structured by the dichotomy between normative and non-normative, for my collaborators dance becomes a potential way to go beyond their supposed "natural" gender and sexual behaviour and explore unconsidered possibilities. Assuming Judith Butler's perspective, according to which, 'gender identity grounds on the stylized repetition of acts through time' (1988: 520), Bharatanatyam *Abhinaya* become for them a space where to extend their experience to different kinds of stylized repetitions. It allows them a personal exploration of different series of act, different sorts of repeating (Butler 1988: 520) that, even if socially perceived as non-normative and "unnatural", they may feel as part of their identities. Moreover, by learning and performing gender features that have not been "assigned" to them, they may also show how gender and sexuality are culturally learned and performed and therefore possible to unlearn and de-construct. In this exploration, the body is assumed 'as a locus where experiments are played out and attitudes performed, that both replicates the status quo and provides challenges to it' (Shay, 2009: 8). Similarly, bodily movement are perceived not only as a 'social text' on which cultural benefits can be inscribed (Desmond, 1993-4: 36) but also as a tool through which the social actors can actively re-draw their positions. In this context, Bharatanatyam *Abhinaya* can be considered as a powerful modality for social actors 'to make changes in the way they construct and make sense of their changing world' (Emigh and Hunt 1992: 196).

2.2 Dancing love and desire

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the performance of *Abhinaya* does not simply consist in a precise translations of poetic texts through gestures and movements. The acts of impersonation in which dancers engage must go beyond physicality and involve the experience and transmission of emotions and feelings. In particular, while some *Abhinaya* pieces have a more descriptive nature, others are based on the expression of specific characters' emotional states. Dancers are thus asked to deeply understand what a character may feel, in order to experience and transmit it to the audience. As anthropologist Judith Lynne Hanna specifies, the aim of a Bharatanatyam dancer, according to the ancient treatise on Indian dramaturgy, the *Natyasastra*, is to express feeling moods or *bhavas,* situations and acts in order to evoke in the spectator the appropriate emotive responses, the *rasas*[7] (1988: 102). Those feelings are generally addressed to a specific subject, who vary in relation to the type of composition that is translated through movement. At times, these type of pieces work as worships addressed to specific Hindu deities, in which dancers express their love, devotion and desire of union with their god, through their bodies. In other cases, the text being translated through movement is an erotic one and the dancer acts in relationship to her or his beloved, who, also in this case, is often a god. Indeed, in this context, it is quite hard to demarcate a clear-cut line between devotional and erotic expressions of love. This is due to several reasons. First, within the type of devotion characterizing Hindu religion, the *Bhakti*, what a devote feels and expresses for a deity is an intimate and erotic form of love (Hanna, 1988: 105). Second, the "purification" process of the *Sadir Kacheri* actualised by Rukmini Devi, attempted to translate any expression of erotic love as a metaphor of the devotional desire of union with god (Allen, 1997; O'Shea, 2007; Krishnan 2009). As a consequence, while the erotic pieces (*Shringara*) characterised by a less devotional nature, are still learned nowadays and practiced within the mainstream Bharatanatyam style, they assume a form that fits within the social limits of "acceptability". As mentioned earlier, only female dancers usually engage in these type of performances, since the expression of love and desire by a male dancer to a same-sex subject would not express the ideal of strength and masculinity he

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7 *'Rasa,* literally meaning "taste" is the specific kind of aesthetic pleasure that penetrates the spectator when the dancer expresses the appropriate feeling' (Natali, 2009: 96). In the classic repertory we can find nine principle *rasas*: *śṛngāra* (love), *hāsya* (comic), *karuṇa* (compassion), *bībhatsa* (disgust), *bhayānaka* (fear), *raudra* (anger), *vīra* (heroism), *adbhuta* (astonishment), e *śānta* (peace) (Azzaroni, 2006: 335-336).

is socially expected to represent. By opposite, it would originate thoughts and rumours about his sexual orientation[8].

Relevant exceptions, are the cases of hereditary styles like the one practiced and transmitted within the Pillai lineage from Thanjore, in which *Abhinaya* pieces can still be characterised by strong erotic features that sometimes do not fit with the contemporary devotional image of this choreutic form. Interestingly, they are learned and performed by both female and male dancers. Anirudh Knight, a dancer part of this lineage, speaks of the general reaction people have in seeing him performing *shringara* pieces. 'There is this common way' – he said- 'in which male dancers in India perform *Abhinaya* constantly trying to remind the audience "I am male, I am male, I am macho", and when they see me, it is still hard for a lot of people to digest' (24/08/2013). As I had the opportunity to observe during my fieldwork, male dancers who engage in these pieces are quite rare. However, if for some of them, like Anirudh, it is still a matter of art and talent, for my collaborators these pieces become spaces of exploration and expression. Among them, I can distinguish those who choose to detached from the mainstream Kalakshetra style and perform these pieces in order to engage in a personal sensual, 'erotic exploration and expression of the self' (S.J., 14/08/13), and those who, in addition to this, choose to do it for communicating to people, choose to do it as part of their queer activism.

What, in particular, characterises these more "expressive" types of *Abhinaya* pieces and differentiate them from the more descriptive bodily storytelling, is the deeper emotional involvement that the performers must go through in order to feel as someone else would do. The narration of stories and the impersonation of multiple gender roles usually relies upon the codification of specific gestures and movements that are fixed in a sort of choreographic pattern and are performed and transmitted without variations. Differently, in performing a more expressive piece, the individual interpretation of the poetic composition by the dancer is an essential component. As one of my collaborators told me while teaching me a particularly erotic piece, 'the *guru* does not show you specific movements to use for translating an erotic composition, he gives you the lyrics and tell you the story, than you have to make your own dance' (S.J., 14/08/13). Particularly relevant in this context is the expressive unit known as *padam*, which is nowadays embedded within the seven-parts repertoire of the traditional

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[8] I here base my arguments on personal conversations I had with several male Bharatanatyam dancers during my fieldwork in Chennai.

Bharatanatyam recital[9] (Meduri, 2003a: 141). Mainly written between the 17th and 19th centuries by Telegu and Tamil composers, the *padams* are still considered as major expressive elements within the dance repertoire (Allan, 1997: 75). They usually consist in expressions of erotic love by a *nayaki* (female devotee) to her beloved *nayaka* (male deity or human patron) (Puri, 2011: 79). The direct communication of these two characters is usually mediated by the figure of the *sakhi,* 'female friend who carries messages between the two lovers, sometimes staying into the *nayaka*'s arms along the way' (Allan, 1997: 75-76). The *padam* is characterised by the dancer's individual interpretation within the process of 'amplifying and explaining the text lines with the help of mimetic expression known as *Abhinaya*' (Meduri, 2003a: 141). Meduri describes this interpretation in terms of improvisation, which she defines as 'a paradoxical phenomenon in which the dancer negotiates her artistic freedom from within traditional parameters' (2003a: 141). The *padam* is thus a relevant example of how *Abhinaya* demands a deep emotional participation of the dancer and her/his identification with the emotional state of the character s/he is impersonating.

Thus, the experiencing of love in order to create a bodily way to express it, can become for some dancers a space where to cross not only physical borders but also emotional ones. Whatever the nature of the love and desire of an *Abhinaya* piece is, it allows dancers to explore and express feelings for multiple types of subjects, even for same-sex ones. Also in this case, dance can become a safe space for the expression of what in society is seen as wrong, forbidden. At the same time, it can reveal how the dichotomy between normative, "natural" gender behaviours and "unnatural" exceptional ones, is specifically culturally constructed. It can show how this dichotomis are based on a performative system which is rarely questioned. As Desmond puts it, 'so much privilege relies in heterosexual culture's ability to interpret itself as society […] as the elemental form of human association, as the indivisible basis of all communities' (2001: 11). While the heteronormative system is socially meant to be the only acceptable type of love relationship, in *Abhinaya* different possibilities can be explored and expressed. By destabilising known possibilities, this choreutic space may offer, both to performers and audience, 'an opportunity to find new ways of interpreting gender and sexuality showing that, it does not have to be like this' (Burt 2009: 159-160).

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[9] The seven-part structural sequencing of the *Bharatanatyam* repertoire consist in: *allarippu, jatiswaram, sabdam, varnam, padam, tillana* and *sloka* (Meduri, 2003a: 143).

2.3 Performing Oneness in a Dualistic cultural reality

What makes the choreographic possibilities of border-crossing that we explored, more powerful and socially acceptable, is their connection with ancient Hindu texts and the spiritual concepts that are inscribed in them. Those indigenous perspectives, clash with a social reality characterised by a dichotomy between normative and non-normative gender behaviours. In particular, they contrast with the post-colonial nationalistic fixation of a mainstream dichotomy male/female and a dominant heterosexual system (Nandi, 1983; Sweet and Zwilling, 2000; Vanita, 2002). While Western theories and concepts used by LGBT groups to question this mainstream system are in the Indian context generally associated with the immoral West that imported homosexual behaviours (Vanita, 2002), much different is the common perception of Indigenous, traditional perspectives. Considered to be part of a traditional culture and thus perceived as related to the traditional Hindu values, these conceptualisations on gender maintain a legitimate rather than an illicit status. This makes them particularly relevant in our investigation, since they can be perceived by my collaborators as culturally legitimising the choreutic dymanics of borders-crossing characterising *Abhinaya*.

In her essay about the process of "transcending gender" in Indian classical dance, scholar Purnima Shah, highlights how the dancers' attempt to flow between gender in Indian classical dance is strictly related to the indigenous concept of "oneness" or "non-duality", according to which "completeness" and perfection can be achieved exclusively in the spiritual transcendence of one's gender (Shah 1998: 3). These perspectives seem to be particularly deep-seated within the Hindu spiritual and mythological realm, largely characterising part of the huge corpus of Indian mythology and literature, as well as the theoretical principles of several philosophical and spiritual schools. Interestingly, according to the *Rg Veda*[10]*,* the world before creation lacked all distinctions and contrasts, including those of sex and gender (Sweet and Zwilling, 2000: 101). The pre-Vedic form of Lord Siva, associated with this ancient period, the god *Ardhanariswara,* was indeed an androgynous divinity. It reveals a seemingly perfect, indissoluble unity, complete in himself/herself (Goldberg, 2000: 8). Moreover, another representation of *Shiva*, particularly relevant in this context, the Lord of Dance, *Shiva Nataraja,* includes in its body both male and female energies. The two parts of *Nataraja,* continuously coexisting, become in the technical component of Bharatanatyam, the

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[10] The *Vedas* are sacred texts from which Hindu religious thought is derived. There are four primary texts: the *Rg Veda*, the *Ajur Veda*, the *Sama Veda* and the *Atharva Veda*.

Nritta, as well as in other classical types of Indian dance, two different styles of movement. Also, in the Tantric school of Hinduism[11], the Supreme Being is conceptualized as one complex sex, the right side representing the male and the left side the female. According to this perspective, 'any human can energize or activate the chosen sexual principle within him or her' (Rawson, 1973 in Shah, 1998: 10). Thus, traditional Hindu perspectives seem to highlight somehow the performative nature of gender and sexuality theorised by Western scholars. Some nineteenth-century Indian texts, by instance, stressed this performativity, since the gender roles of a couple within a ritual of marriage are described as arbitrarily assigned: two women break chicken wishbones or shell almonds, the one who happens to get a particular piece takes the masculine role and the other the feminine role (Vanita, 2005: 39).

If indigenous perspectives and the mythological and religious sources reporting them, seem to perceive, at least theoretically, gender as something learned and performed, they similarly influence the perception of union between human beings. Although same-sex relationship are nowadays socially (and legally, as we explored in chapter 1) perceived as opposed to Hindu tradition and unknown in pre-modern Hindu society, spiritual and philosophical Hindu perspectives do not seem to declare the immorality and illegitimacy of such behaviours (Vanita, 2005; 2011). As Vanita points out, 'there is a gulf between those opinions and those of several Hindu spiritual leaders who draw on traditional concepts of the Self as unlimited by gender in their comments on same-sex relationships' (2005: 29). By instance, Guru Prabhavananda of the Ramakrishna mission[12], used to view all desires as the same, based on the idea that all beauty is a manifestation of divine energy that can lead the lover toward divine beauty (Isherwood, 1980 in Vanita, 2005: 29). If every living creature is perceived as part of the same cosmic unity, gender categories can only be seen as temporary devices used to interact in a social reality.

Moreover, several scholars (Sweet and Zwilling, 2000; Vanita, 2002) who explore queer dynamics in ancient India, highlight how some ancient Hindu texts, upon which the stories told in *Abhinaya* are based, tell stories of gods actively engaging in same-sex relationships. Similarly, according to them, other texts report stories of same-sex marriages and other types of union. In this context, the concept of Oneness, seems to undervalue the distinction between individuals as well as the distinction between their gender identities, while emphasising their

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[11] *Tantra* is an Asian body of beliefs and practices which lies upon the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine energy that creates and maintains the universe (White, 2001: 9).
[12] Volunteer organisation based in Kolkata (West Bengal), core of the wideworld spiritual movement known as Ramakrishna movement. It subscribes to the ancient Hindu philosophy of Vedanta.

union as the only relevant issue. As the transgender MtF dancer Mesma Belsare tells us, 'the figure of Lord Ayappa, who was born from the conjugal unity of two male deities, Hari and Hara, the story of Vishnu's magical transformation into the seductress Mohini, and of course the most popular divine couple, Krishna and Radha, cross-dressing in each-others cloths in love sport, all make us reflect on love as superior to any distinction of gender and types of love' (The Queer East, 2009). The dancer's words underline how these concepts are largely utilised by non-mainstream subjects in supporting their identities and behaviours. The exploration of Hindu ancient texts and the stories and theories they tell is therefore relevant because meaningful for my collaborators as a legitimate support against the fixed reality. While expressing their non-normative sexualities and desires in *Abhinaya*, they appeal to tradition as a mark of legitimacy.

The different modalities in which this process can happen, are exactly the central focus of my fieldwork research and dissertation, which will be explored in the following chapters: personal experiences, personal meanings, personal perceptions of how Bharatanatyam *Abhinaya* may become part of a legitimate expression of non-normative gender and sexual bahaviours. In particular, the next chapter describes in details the pattern of our connection and interaction, the story of a fieldwork experience.

3. Re-Thinking the field: the story of an ethnographic exchange

If ethnography relies upon the 'communicative interaction on intellectual, affective and expressive levels between researcher and individual community members' (Giurchescu, 1999: 48), an ethnographic account must tell not only the experiences of a group of social actors, but also the story of how they happened to share them with an ethnographer. In the attempt to make the voices of my collaborators speak and their body dance, it is first necessary to tell the reader who those voices and bodies are and how we have connected and interacted.

This section of the dissertation is a reflection on my fieldwork experience and an attempt to describe it: who are the social actors with whom I interacted, when and where these interactions took place, what are the dynamics that brought me there. It encompasses each step of our exchange, from my initial attempt to create connections electronically, to our tangible interaction in the field and our ongoing communication. In particular, it underlines how central our exchange has been in determining features and dynamics of the field. Through the connections created with my collaborators I first planned my fieldwork research; through our practical interaction in the field my theoretical representations met a cultural reality, and within our current communication I am daily realising essential details of their experiences, re-defining my understanding of them. Within the ethnographic process, a group of scattered individuals I met on the web, turned into the people with whom I was sharing my daily life, immerged in social, political spaces of interaction. Living with them, I had the possibility to contextualise their experiences in the reality they inhabit and that partially characterises and influences who they are. Their diversity progressively shaped my field as a multi-sited one, where links are created by the network of their occasional interactions and by our shared ethnographic connections.

Throughout this chapter, I attempt to underline how the spaces, at times geographically and socially distant one from another, in which they experience and construct their daily life, have gradually become the locations of our "field". The following sections introduce the story of an interaction, its creation and continuation, underling how, step by step, fieldwork and daily life merge together, in a way that, as anthropologist Andrée Grau observes, 'the separation of "work" and "life" [becomes] difficult and possibly not even desirable' (1999: 167). In other words, this chapter tells the story of an ethnographic process: a story of

planning, of expecting, of being surprised, of defining and re-defining, a story that is not ended yet.

3.1 Approaching a multi-sited space of interaction

The process of constructing the field began with searching for individual experiences related to my initial queries and interests. Although, as aforementioned, some private conversations with a male dancer I knew stimulated my reflections on Bharatanatyam as a potential space for the exploration and expression of gender and sexuality, I was not really expecting to easily find information and material on the topic to proceed with further investigations. I did not know whether the same phenomenon was meaningful to other persons than the dancer I spoke to, and if it was, it could have been a quite personal, not openly shared experience. However, when exploring the web, I interestingly realised that it was not the case. While in fact almost nothing was written about the topic on an academic level and the ethnographic material produced in relation to it was almost inexistent, the web happened to be quite a rich source of shared experiences. Articles on online newspapers, personal pages, and blogs seemed to be relevant sites where homosexual, bisexual men and transgender persons MtF tell about their exploration or discovery of gender and sexuality through Bharatanatyam. This material made me realise not only that the choreutic possibility of border-crossing in *Abhinaya* could, indeed, have a deep meaning in social actors' experiences, but also that some social actors wanted to share these meanings. This motivated me to proceed with my exploration. The most interesting and relevant sources that I found, were mostly related to the city of Chennai, in Tamil Nadu, a region of Southern India. As previously explored, the city was the main centre of the revival through which Bharatanatyam took its current form, and continues nowadays to be the main centre of practice, performance and academic research regarding this dance. The sources I found told the personal stories of homosexual, bisexual and transgender MtF dancers, who, in different modalities, shape their gender and sexual identity through Bharatanatyam, or involve the dance in their LGBT activism across the city. This material, strongly helped me to constitute a general profile of these dancers and attempt to engage in an initial communication with them. After further research and exchanges I was able to identify my potential field location and my potential collaborators, who seemed to be extremely different, especially in the way they involve Bharatanatyam in their daily lives. Their individual experiences however, were related through their "non-normative" modality of engaging with this classical Indian dance. Moreover, they seemed to be somehow practically connected through the network of activism of the LGBT community in Chennai

and especially through particular events they sporadically organise. In particular, "Nirangal", a two day LGBT performance festival, within the bigger annual event "Chennai Rainbow Pride" happening every year during June/July, was supposed to be the starting point of my research, giving me the possibility to meet dancers who could become my collaborators and to start the actual construction of this variegated field.

My initial plan was overturned even before arriving to the field, because of an unexpected, unwanted accident: the day before my departure from Paris to Chennai, my passport was stolen. It was quite hard for me to realise and accept that without a small piece of paper with codes and pictures of me I was totally disabled to travel out of Europe, especially to my over-dreamt fieldwork location. However, back in Italy, my native country, I "easily" repaired this loss: a new passport, a new Indian Visa and a new flight ticket to Chennai were ready in less than three weeks. My departure shifted from the end of June to the middle of July 2013, impeding my participation in the events of the "Chennai Rainbow Pride".

Even if, before finally taking that flight, I was extremely afraid that this change would affect the construction of a network of connections between the dancers taking part in the event and me, it was interestingly not the case. During my first week in Chennai I had the chance to meet Aniruddhan, a Bharatanatyam dancer, LGBT activist and scholar in Anthropology with whom I was already in contact and whom I consider to be, in many ways, the pivotal figure of my field. On the 20th of July I met him for the first time, as well as his partner Gowthaman, a lawyer working in the area of human rights and particularly on LGBT rights cases, both of them active members of the LGBT community in Chennai. This first meeting was for me what "Nirangal" was supposed to be according to my plan: the starting point for creating further connections in the field. Indeed, Aniruddhan and Gowthaman gave me their complete, accurate list of whoever, according to them, fits in the general idea of doing Bharatanatyam and being "queer"[13], not only around Chennai but also in Bengalore, where queer groups and activism seem to be particularly present. Moreover, as a scholar in Anthropology, Aniruddhan engaged in the conversation on an academic level, approaching my queries through theories and perspectives, which helped me to define my focus and my approach to the field. He suggested that I keep a strong methodological unity in order to encompass the diversity I was going to find in relation to Bharatanatyam, *Abhinaya* and Queerness. From the useful contacts and the wise anthropological advices he gave me, I

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[13] During my fieldwork I gradually started to favour the term to the less wider "LGBT", since many of my collaborators define themselves and their activism as "queer". Thus, in the text I will use both of the terms, preferring "queer" when referring to social actors who use it in defining themselves.

began establishing connections with individual dancers linked to each other through these three main features. Through the links already created, I gradually established new connections, extending this network of interactions. The social and geographical spaces where my daily dialogical exchanges with these dancers were taking place, became the multi-sited field of my ethnographic research. Gradually, their abstract profiles constructed in my mind from home, began appearing to me as part of complex social processes, which influences who they are, which place they occupy in society, how they act and, how they give meaning to their dancing.

3.2 A multiplicity of Queer experiences

As I gradually realised within the field, the diversity characterising my collaborators' identities and experiences deals with issues of cast, gender and power and, therefore, with dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. The complete absence of women's voices shows how "being openly queer" is a choice that not everyone can make, a privilege that not everyone can have in Indian society. When I asked Aniruddhan whether he knew any female Bharatanatyam dancer involving the dance in LGBT activism, he answered: 'there is not really space to be out [...] it is already not easy to be a woman here, you can imagine how hard can it be to be also queer' (20/07/2013). Thus, the social actors with whom I interacted in the field are, (or used to be) exclusively men, part of different social groups and cultural realities, which determine the modality in which they identify themselves and act according to it, especially through Bharatanatyam. Their identification as homosexual, bisexual or transgender eventually became to my eyes much more complex than merely related to issues of gender and sexuality. It was in fact related to largely different, yet connected, social realities. On the one hand, the field introduced me to a network of Queer activist groups across Chennai (Tamil Nadu) and Bengalore (Karnakata), the profile of which is defined through Western conceptualisations on alternate sexualities and their fights for rights, and the aim of which is to stimulate people's awareness on gender and sexuality issues through art, especially traditional Indian forms. On the other hand, I had the opportunity to engage with subjects who identify themselves through traditional categories and live their lives according to society's expectations on those categories: the traditional groups of *Aravanis* and *Kothis*.

A network of Queer Activism

Many of my collaborators, who identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual men, are actively involved in a network of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) groups, whose activism moves mainly across the cities of Chennai and Bengalore. These groups, as many others across India, define themselves and what they do as "queer", understanding the term as 'whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant […] as an horizon of possibilities whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be defined in advance' (Halperin, 1995: 62, in Dave, 2012: 21). Through their activism they aim to share with people this horizon of unconsidered possibilities. They attempt to make Indian society reflect on the cultural construction of a dichotomy between normative/non-normative and natural/unnatural sexual behaviours and unions. My collaborators are involved in this activism mainly through the use of performative arts and, in particular, through *Abhinaya*. They are related to two main groups, ORINAM, a Chennai based organisation that supports LGBT communities, and the Queer Art Movements, active in stimulating people's awareness on gender and sexuality through performative arts in the city of Bengalore. Supporting the activity of these associations but also organising events individually, my collaborators use the choreutic possibility to perform non-normative gender identity and sexual behaviours in *Abhinaya* to show that normative and non-normative are socially constructed, and that it is not a matter of right and wrong, natural and unnatural. Within the field I actively interacted with those of them based in Chennai, especially with Aniruddhan and Taejha, as well as with others queer dancers who do not openly engage in LGBT activism. Moreover, through them I created a connection with a dancer from the "Queer Arts Movement" from Bengalore with whom I am currently communicating. My interaction with these dancers mainly took place within the area of Besant-Nagar, one of the wealthiest neighborhod of Chennai, and its surroundings. It is there that most of the professional *Bharatanatyam* exponents are living and teaching and that middle and upper class families send their children to learn classical dance and music. It is there that one finds Kalashetra, the academy of Indian traditional arts founded by Rukmini Devi. Many of my collaborators are part of this mainstream panorama as professional Bharatanatyam dancers and teachers, even if all of them are somehow experimenting alternatives to the mainstream high level dance form. Coming from a quite privileged social environment, both in terms of caste level and in terms of educational background, they feel comfortable in openly declaring their sexual orientation and in

involving their dance in their queer activism. My attempt to explore their perceptions of enacting multiple gender positions in *Abhinaya* pieces and how it may be related to their gender identity or sexual orientation was a quite easy process, since it is something they have somehow already reflected upon. Being dancers and being queer, as well as 'queering their Bharatanatyam' (Aniruddhan, 20/07/13), in doing LGBT activism are concepts with which they identify themselves and their activities. Dance seems to have a threefold role in their life: it is something that shapes their identities, it is something in which they can experience and explore their sexuality and gender attitudes, and above all it is something through which they can concretely show people how the creation of a space that transcends the mainstream dichotomy male man/female woman as well as the mainstream heteronormativity is indeed possible.

The traditional group of Aravanis

The social group known in Tamil Nadu as *Aravanis*[14] (and as *Hijra* in other parts of India) is composed of men who change their sex from male to female, usually during their first teen years. These individuals, who mainly identify themselves as female, have occupied a specific place in Indian society for a long period of time. Traditionally considered as bearers of good luck, because they embody both maleness and femaleness while transcending gender at the same time, they used to have an important role in several kinds of ritual, where their main functions were related to different types of folk dances (Nanda, 1999: 9). They have traditionally organised themselves in communes, usually called *jamaats*, matriarchal structures that feature a leader (*guru*) and her initiated students (*chelas*) (Govindan and Vasudevan, 2008: 8). When someone joins these groups, they effectively leave the mainstream society and many of its norms. They then become part of the community through a ritual emasculation and begin being subjected to the rules of the group (Marcom, 2013: 90). As Marcom reminds us, colonial and post-colonial discourses of sexual morality put this social group in an illicit social and choreutic space (2013: 89). Although their ritual role is still alive in Indian society, they are today placed mainly out of the caste system and, in order to earn a living, are obliged to engage in a variety of jobs, often including prostitution. Their modalities of experiencing *Abhinaya*, are not simply related to the possibility of performing

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[14] The term refers to a section of the popular epic poem *Mahabharata*. As Priya Babu points out, '*Aravanis* see themselves as the transgendered aspect that *Krishna* assumed for a night to marry *Aravan*, to fulfil his wish for conjugal union before his sacrifice to the gods the next morning' (2007: 17, in Govindan and Vasudevan, 2008: 9).

and emphasising the gender identity they happened to acquire. Indeed, the opportunity to learn Bharatanatyam, as a high level, "traditional", "devotional" dance style, in the rare case they have the chance to access it, can cause a real, concrete change in their social position and therefore in their life. My collaborators represent the exceptions: they are Bharatanatyam dancers who currently live more or less independently from their communities. Narthaki is nowadays a relatively popular dancer, who performs and teaches in the context of the mainstream Bharatanatyam. Ponni and Anjali happened to have access to a Bharatanatyam education and recently accomplished their goal of opening a dance school for unprivileged children in a slum of Chennai. Within the field I interacted both with them and with traditional communities based in slum areas of Chennai and earning a living mainly through performing folk dance in social gatherings. These encounters gave me the opportunity to observe how Bharatanatyam can work as a bridge connecting them to mainstream society. My interaction with them, therefor,e took place in highly diverse areas of Chennai, from the wealthy area of central Chennai where Narthaki is currently living, to the degraded area of North Chennai where Ponni and Anjali live and teach and the slum where I met a whole community of *Aravanis*. Approaching their situation, I began to realise how even dance can be strongly socially labelled. By dancing a mediocre and easy to learn folk dance that everyone can have access to, they will never change who they are, a situation completely different, from what may happen if they had learnt Bharatanatyam, as the stories of my collaborators tell. They are the exceptions, the non-normative who, by accessing the legitimate, classical form and not the usual low folk in which *Aravanis* engage, extended and empowered their possibility of agency.

The double identity of Kothis

For *Aravanis*, Bharatanatyam can be a space of tangible connection with the mainstream, a modality to be, in a way, part of society. What distinguishes *Kothis* from *Aravanis* is their ability to carry on two parallel lives, a secret and a public one, managing, thus, to remain part of mainstream society. They are men who sometimes dress like women. Often, their posture is related to an homoerotic inclination, but not necessarily. *Kothis* live their normative everyday lives as men, with a regular job, a wife, a family. But when night comes, they dress as women, and usually engage in dance performances that may or may not end with homoerotic activity. They are different from, yet linked to *Aravanis*. Before becoming part of

an *Aravanis* community through a ritual emasculation and leaving society and its norm, they are indeed *Kothis*. Thus, they are, somehow, in-between the normative and the non-normative. As Marcom observes, 'traditionally, *Kothis* occupy a liminal and opaque space in South Asia, with a public identity that is not differentiated from boys/men' (2013: 87). In a contemporary social reality that links cross-dressing to an illicit realm of erotic dance and immoral sexual activity, the secrecy of their second life becomes essential. Dance is thus part of this untold reality: it is the space where they experience the femininity they must hide in daily life, in order to stay within the normative. While these sensual, erotic dance styles characterise their escape from public life, Bharatanatyam and *Abhinaya* in particular are a space where they may openly explore femininity through their male bodies. After I left Chennai, I established a connection with a Bharatanatyam student of two of my *Aravanis* collaborators, Ponni and Anjali. He is a boy who sometimes likes to dress as a woman and who loves to explore feminine attitudes and feelings through dance. Our electronic interaction soon became a strong connection, because of his wish to share with others his sporadic need to explore femininity. Only his teachers and I know about his secret, his private cross-dressing life, that he wants to keep private, because it would not be accepted by his family and friends. Occasions to cross-dress without being seen are for him quite hard to find, but through *Abhinaya*, he does not need to dress as a woman, he can become a woman: a princess, a goddess, a queen, only for a short time, but with no need to hide himself, with no fear of being removed from a normative context.

What strongly links these diverse individual experiences we explored, is their essential connection to Bharatanatyam. Although in different modalities, this choreutic form and in particular the possibilities of border-crossing that *Abhinaya* allows, have for all my collaborators a deep meaning. *Abhinaya* is the core of their experiences and the core of our ethnographic exchange. By following this thread of *Abhinaya* stories, of gestures and meanings, a field made of diverse individualities gradually took form as an ethnographic unity.

3.4. Methodological approach: telling different stories through the same narrative style

The methodology through which I approached the field based upon the necessity to create unity within a variety of individual experiences. By exchanging with each of my collaborators in the same modality and through the same tools, I was gradually creating an

ethnographic connection between them. In the attempt to observe how Bharatanatyam is part of their life and what they can experience in it, I engaged in a constant process of participant observation, which I consider in this instance not as an ethnographic tool but as a practice of sharing, which informed the whole period of fieldwork. I spent my time in Chennai moving around the city on trusty rickshaws in order to reach the different locations where my collaborators were living, teaching and performing. I shared my daily life with these people, in a dialectic exchange of knowledge and experience that I somehow brought back with me from the field in the form of field notes, informal interviews, video extracts, sound recording, photo material and memories still alive in my mind. This constant process of sharing social spaces, of participating in the same daily reality allowed me to explore the way they stand and move within the complexity of socio-cultural dynamics and the place that Bhararatanatyam has in these dynamics. This exploration was certainly not characterised exclusively by a process of observation and participation. Within teaching situations or informal meetings, I was continuously discussing with my collaborators, listening to what they wanted to tell me about their stories, about the place Bharatanatyam occupies in their lives. Sometimes, I was obliged to ask other people I met in the field to engage in these exchanges and help me to understand my social actors who speak only Tamil. This created, in some cases, a strong confrontation between normative and non-normative individuals that allowed me to understand how the non-mainstream identities of my collaborators are sometimes negatively perceived. In some of my exchanges with Ponni and Anjali, by instance, the person who came to help me with the translation was Maharaja, a Tamil friend I met when we were both living in Clermont-Ferrand, (Auvergne, France). Although he never hesitated to help me with my research, I perceived each time him to be highly uncomfortable with the kind of social actors I was mainly collaborating with. In his translation of Anjali's words I could feel his evident estrangement, his fear or disappointment in pronouncing the word "trans" or "*Aravani*" which he often translated with "these people". Indeed, the unavoidable confrontation between very different social groups I somehow created in these field situations was for me a relevant, additional occasion to observe social interactions inside Tamil society.

Overall, this more 'dialogical mode of knowledge construction' (Bakka and Gore 2007: 1), associated to a constant process of observation allowed me to get closer to their personal perspectives and meanings. At the same time, a particular combination of video recording and interview techniques gave me the opportunity to approach their individual experiences in relation to specific dance pieces. Because of the narrative feature of *Abhinaya*, and the

modality in which it can precisely translate a text word by word, I thought it would be relevant to use video recordings of my collaborators dancing in order to let them explain the meanings of their gestures and movements. My initial plan was therefore to produce video material of my collaborators dancing *Abhinaya* pieces, and use it as a tool to engage with them in self-confrontation interviews, in order to make them relive the situation, re-experience his or her mental and emotional state and describe it (Lièvre and Rix 2010: 2). The term "self-confrontation" defines several kinds of interview techniques based on placing once again the agent in the live situation as captured on video film, the situation as experienced and recounted becoming the object of the interview (Bakka and Gore, 2007: 2). In dance research this technique is usually based on the use by the researcher in the interview process of an already existing video of the social actor dancing. However, as Vared Amit points out, 'it is rather the circumstance which defines the method rather than the method defining the circumstance' (2000: 11). It just happened that at times, while having informal conversation about the performance of gender in *Abhinaya*, some of my collaborators started describing pieces that were particularly relevant for them in relation to the topic. This made me re-consider the combination that I had planned to use and the possibility of inverting the two components. During our dialogical exchanges I, therefore, began regularly asking them to tell me about *Abhinaya* pieces which they considered particularly close to their experiences, to explain precisely the story behind the narrations, the gestures and movement used and their meanings. Afterwards, I usually asked them to perform those pieces in order for me to record them. This methodology, allowed me not only to understand the codified meanings of gestures and attitudes that the dancers were using in impersonating characters through *Abhinaya*, but also to get close to the personal meanings that they give to specific dance pieces. Combining observation and video recording with dancers' own explanations, I had the possibility to 'go beyond the visual surface' (Felfoldi, 2002: 18), beyond the form, and to get close to their living experiences. Moreover, in some cases, this combined process was integrated with a number of *Abhinaya* classes which I attended with some of them, and the aim of which was to gain an understanding of those specific pieces.

Within my ethnographic experience I thus approached *Abhinaya* as the real space of connection between the queer network through which I was moving, as the space where my collaborators, in different modalities define and re-shape themselves, tell and re-invent their stories and their world. They move through the same language, through the same gestures but giving and making different meanings, telling different stories. My attempt, within the ethnography that I will present in the final chapter, is narrating those gestures, which they

make meaningful in different ways, like many different stories, told through different narrative styles.

4. Bharatanatyam *Abhinaya*: a legitimate space of agency for the performance of the illicit

> *Put a human face on it. Let's not talk about it in theory. Give me a story. Give me lives.*
>
> Gavin Newson, mayor of San Francisco, after he authorised same-sex marriage in the city (2004)[15]

This chapter constitutes the core of my narration. What has been explored and described so far, is here re-elaborated and discussed through looking at my collaborators dancing. By narrating the stories they attempt to tell through *Abhinaya,* this last section of the dissertation displays the cultural dynamics that transform the choreutic moments into spaces of agency. After having explored the social, political, historical patterns that gave to Bharatanatyam its contemporary status and to *Abhinaya* its contemporary features; after having explored the modality in which the identities and sexualities characterising my collaborators are part of a non-normative social reality; after having gone through our ethnographic process of exchanging experiences and meanings, it is now time to give space to those meanings, to let them flow through dance. The aim of this chapter is to explore *Abhinaya*, as a fertile ground to understand the social processes, in its ability to both incorporate and challenge cultural structures. In this regard, gestures are observed as sites where meanings are located, as *loci* of transmitting queer histories and possibilities (Munoz, 2001: 426). The underlying assumption is that it is through looking at these dancers' meanings, their lives and their stories, that we will perceive how *Abhinaya* becomes a legitimate space of agency for the expression of the illicit, a cultural bridge allowing my collaborators to be at one time in and out the mainstream reality.

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[15] Cited in (Vanita, 2005: 1).

4.1 Dancing desire, Queering Bharatanatyam

> On stage, when I started emoting the piece, it suddenly struck me with the force of lighting that I was in love with Krishna. I realized I was not looking for something abstract like grace or blessing but for this touch and caress […] I realized I had my own ideas of what Krishna will do to me, to my mind and, equally or more importantly, to my body. It was a palpable physical yearning. For those forty minutes I felt in my bones what it meant to be in love emotionally and physically. I could feel each cell of my body throb with desire and in a flash I understood what Radha must be going through in those beautiful pieces from Geetha Govindam.

<div align="right">

Aniruddhan V. (2006)

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It happened that at some point, Aniruddhan, who has danced since he was a child, got tired of dancing devotional *Abhinaya* pieces. As usual among professional male Bharatanatyam dancers trained in Kalakshetra style, he was never engaging in *Shringara* (erotic) pieces, generally perceived as strong expressions of femininity, because usually addressed by a woman to her beloved. As he tells in a short story he published for ORINAM, he was, however, looking at his female classmates performing *Shringara* and craving to engage in those pieces that express human erotic desire for another man (2009). One day he just did it. He performed a *varnam*[16] in *Charukesi ragaam*[17], a bodily translation of love and desire for Krishna. It was the first time that he openly crossed the line of normative and made his Bharatanatyam become queer. Standing on stage in his male body, expressing erotic desire for a same-sex subject, moving as a female dancer would have done, he was dancing across the cultural boundaries of gender and sexuality, exploring and sharing unconsidered possibilities. He gradually realised that the queer space he found was not only a place for defining and re-defining himself, but also a powerful tool to reach people.

As Aniruddhan's experience underlines, the combination of *shringara* (erotic) *Abhinaya* pieces addressed to male characters and of the figure of the male Bharatanatyam dancer invented in post-colonial times, constitutes a potential space for the expression of queerness. The often non-specified gender of the person who is talking makes the act of queering *shringara* pieces extremely simple: male dancers must engage in the bodily narration as men, with no need to actually change the piece itself. This space, that came into being though a set of historical, political dynamics, is experienced by my collaborator as a choreographic *locus* of agency. Queering dance is, in Aniruddhan words, a tool 'to make people think and react, to make them feel uncomfortable or to make them say, finally someone did it!' (20/07/13).

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[16] A *Varnam* is a complex choreutic composition including both *Abhinaya* and *Nritta*.
[17] The term *raagam* indicates the melodic pattern of the musical composition.

In a contemporary context in which LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) subjects are currently living and loving as criminals, the expression of same-sex love through dance becomes a powerful tool in the hands of queer activists groups. For those of my collaborators involved in LGBT activism dance represents 'a way of staging sexuality and a relationship to the audience that exceed a simple heterosexual model' (Desmond, 2001: 6). If gender and sexualities are performed through repetitions of acts, the possibility to create a rupture in this repetition through dance, showing unconsidered alternatives to what is meant to be right and natural, is for their group a powerful modality to 'destabilise received and rehearsed categories' (Fraleigh, 2004: 15). As Aniruddhan observes, 'dance is powerful because you make the concept real on your body. You make the concept concrete on stage and people can't say, can't refuse it, because it is there, it is practical: you can watch it, you can walk on stage and you can touch it' (20/07/13).

4.2 Claiming legitimacy through tradition

The network of queer activism in which some of my collaborators participate has recently begun to extend and strengthen. In December 2013, the re-introduction of section 377 by the Supreme Court of India declared same-sex love to be illegal, again. Since that moment, the "Queer Arts Movement", a group of artists active between Bengalore and Chennai (Southern India), felt the need to communicate to the Indian population that love cannot be illegal, 'love cannot be a crime!' (redifNEWS, 2013). As I discuss elsewhere, they felt the necessity to show that nothing is natural or unnatural in terms of gender, sexuality, desire, and love: everything, especially the norm, is culturally performed' (2014: 1). In November 2013, the month before the final verdict of the Supreme Court of India on homosexual sexual acts was declared, Masoom, a dancer part of this group, performed a queer piece in occasion of the Bengalore Queer Pride. In that period, LGBT activist groups were aware of the potential re-activation of section 377 and the performance has to be, therefore, contextualised in this collective feeling of opposition (Azzarelli, 2014: 8). His performance was a bodily narration through *Abhinaya* of these lyrics:

'The Lord who always slept with his head on my breasts
Is - ayyayyo!- now sick of me.
His eyes fixed, unblinking on my face, he would say:

"When dusk falls, your face, alas, will be hidden in the dark".

And then asked me in broad daylight, for a lamp.

Ayyayyo! He is now sick of me.

Biting my mouth in love play, since to talk would be to let go,

My lord would speak only with his hands,

Ayyayyo! He is now sick of me.

Lest in sleep his embrace should loosen,

he will ask me to tie down the four corners of our blanket.

Ayyayyo! He is now sick of me.'

<div align="center">(Paiyada, XVI century's Telugu poem)[18]</div>

These moving lines tell the story of a passionate, painful love. The person who is talking seems to be moved by an inner, struggling desire. According to my collaborator Masoom, this *padam* was written by a *devadasi* for her beloved Krishna, but where, in the text, is underlined that the person speaking is a woman? Realising that nowhere it is clearly stated that the writer is female, Masoom decided to perform this *padam*, *Paiyada*, as a man, who is struggling against the indifference of his male lover. There was no reason, as he told me, to suppose that Krishna, the god known for being the beloved of many women, would not have been the beloved of a young man this time (Masoom, 12/03/13). He created his own choreography, as dancers usually do with *padams*, drawing from the set of gestures *Abhinaya* provides them with. As already mentioned, this expressive unit is traditionally meant not to be transmitted in a fixed form, but it is based on the interpretation and codification of the poem by the dancers, or even on their improvisation on stage (Meduri, 2003a: 141). He realised the piece thinking of himself as a young boy who used to meet secretly Krishna every night. In a very simple way on a choreutic level, Masoom made this piece become queer, showing how this does not change, in any way, its emotional intensity, attempting to deconstruct 'the means through which gay behaviour can be marked as different' (Burt, 2009: 159). In the case of my interaction with Masoom, since it was exclusively made through electronic media, I actually had the possibility to watch a short video of his performance before engaging with him in a proper self-confrontation interview. Through this exploration I had the possibility to explore how the dichotomy between a fixed aesthetic form and a quite

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[18] This poem, and all of the information about it, have been given to me directly by Masoom, through our electronic exchange.

fluid meaning characterising *Abhinaya* (Natali and Pizza, 2006: 47), allowed my collaborator to create quite easily a male piece out of a text that was supposed to tell a female experience. Minimal details distinguished this queer performance from a traditional one. The dancer emphasised these details in the attempt to make his male gender evident and to describe the particular features of love between two men. Translating the first two lines of the *padam* in movement, '*The Lord who always slept with his head on my breasts, Is - ayyayyo!- now sick of me',* he did not use two *alapadma*[19], *mudra* traditionally used to indicate a female prosperous breast, but a *pataka*[20] showing the perfect line of a male one. Similarly, in the narration of playful moments between the two characters he uses specific bodily movements that he associates to the love making between two men: 'the hickeys on the neck, the sliding of hand below the waist' (Masoom, 12/03/13).

   If interacting with other activists like Aniruddhan I was more focused on the potential that *Abhinaya* has to show unconsidered possibilities, my exchange with Masoom made me reflect on what is it that makes this dance in particular so powerful. Bharatanatyam is a traditional choreutic form, commonly thought to tell stories from a morally pure, culturally elevated, ancient past. As Masoon made me realise, this past is generally perceived as "still safe" from the modern shame of homo-erotic love. He explained to me that 'a quite common thought in contemporary India, is that not-normative behaviours in terms of gender and sexuality have never been part of Indian culture, but are immoral colonial impositions, western imports' (Masoom, 12/03/14). According to him, *Bharatanatyam* is considered, especially by the high castes, as a bodily translation of ancient Indian texts. If activists show that in these traditional texts there is queerness, then people might think that it has always been there, and that it is not so extraneous to Indian culture. Tradition, becomes in this case 'the precise opposite of the corrupted, impure and deformed "modern society"' (Kastrinou-Theodoropoulou, 2009: 4). 'The expression of queerness through a contemporary form would not be considered, their voices would not be heard, because it comes from the West, just like those immoral behaviours' (Masoom 13/03/14). But they want to be heard, they want to destabilise the dichotomy that marks them as illicit, showing people unconsidered possibilities. On the one hand, they want to reach people within the LGBT community, who may perceive themselves, especially with the recent change the legal status of homosexuality,

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[19] Hand gesture characterized by the palm facing upward and all of the fingers separated and extended. It has a multitude of meanings, such as the lotus flower, the female breast, the full-moon, a beautiful form.. etc.. (ShaktiBhakti 2011)

[20] Hand gesture characterized by flat palm, finger extended and touching each other and the thumb slightly bent. This *mudra* is largely used in *Bharatanatyam* for its adaptability to a large number of meanings (ShaktiBhakti 2010)

as unnatural, abnormal, illegal. On the other hand, these performers want to reach a broader audience, attempting to change people's view on this fixed dichotomy. As Masoom explains, 'after Section 377 was re-activated in 2013, we have attempted to reach a more general audience and in particular those subjects who make decisions in the country like politicians and religious heads' (Masoom 13/03/14). This attempt based upon the belief that 'dance has the power to change attitudes and opinion with respect to gender and sexuality' (Hanna, 1988: 16-17), and that the legitimate status of Bharatanatyam makes this power even stronger. The endeavour of these performances is to show illicit behaviours through an ancient traditional form in order to gain legitimacy. As I discuss elsewhere, paradoxically, the dance that, in colonial period, was re-invented and purified in order to be disassociated with an illicit world, is now used by the non-normative to perform illicit behaviours, in the attempt to legitimise them (2014: 7). The same dynamics of legitimisation, of connection between mainstream and non-normative space through dance, characterise the stories of some of the *Aravani* dancers I met.

4.3 Re-inventing worlds through Bharatanatyam

Sitting in the living room of her flat in the area of Mylapore (Chennai), just back from her teaching and performing tour in Canada, Narthaki, an *Aravani* Bharatanatyam dancer, narrates and dances a *Varnam* on Amba. 'It is my story' – she said – 'a story of rejection by society and loneliness' (22/08/2013).

In the Hindu epic poem *Mahabharata*, Amba is the eldest daughter of the king of Kashi. She is deeply in love with a man, Salva, but one day she is abducted by king Bhishma, seeking the princess for his step-brother. When she confesses to him that she is in love with another man, Bhishma lets her go back to him. Unfortunately, Salva rejects her, as she was spoiled by her captor's touch. Not even Bhishma, the actual cause of her misfortune can marry her, because of his vote of chastity, nor king Drupada. She is rejected not only by them, but by the whole society, since without any relationship with a man, a woman does not have a place in it anymore. She thus decides to give herself to the only man who will love her, god. She turns to ascetism and pleases the god Shiva, who promises her a revenge on Bishma in the next life. She will be re-born as Sikhandini, who later will turn into a man, Shikandin, the cause of Bishma's death[21].

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[21] I here attempt to tell the story as my collaborator Narthaki told it to me through the translation of my friend Nirhan (22/08/13). It is however a re-construction based on my memory, since I did not record her narration, neither did I immediately write it down.

Staying in her sitting position, using only the upper part of her body, Narthaki performs the narrative part of that *Varnam* for me. Through hand gestures and expressivity of the face, she shows many people around her. In a mood of love and seduction (*shringara rasa*) she addresses her gestures to three different imaginary characters: she asks them, one by one, to join with her in a love union indicating it with *karkata mudra*, a hand gesture made by crossing the fingers of one hand with the other, generally used to indicate the concept of "getting together". One by one all of them reject her, leaving her in a painful state of loneliness, expressed through *Bhayānaka rasa* (fear). With a painful facial expression, she shows that there is no one for her to love in this world. Suddenly, she projects her narration upwards, to someone else. She realises that it is god that she will love now, it is with god that she will become one, using *kilaka mudra*, the hand gesture made by interlocking the two little fingers, indicating a feeling of love. In god she will find peace and desire, through god she will die and re-born as a man who has a place in society, and the strength to kill Bishma.

Narthaki likes to tell and dance this story as the story of her life. Like Amba, she experienced the troubles of being rejected by society, when she was still a man coming to terms with her gender identity. She then left mainstream society and its norms, entering the *Aravani* community. Even if marriage is one of the norms she abandoned, she still wanted to be loved, to find 'a good husband for her' (Narthaki, 22/08/2013). She was hoping and hoping, but she was ridiculed and rejected until she accepted to be alone, to be out of the society, to be illicit. Her lucky access to a fifteen-year *Bharatanatyam* training with the well-known guru Kitappa Pillai in Tanjore, was for her not only the access to a cultural space of connection with mainstream society, but also the discovery of a place for herself, where she could define 'who she is and what is her place in the world' (Narthaki, 22/08/2013). Strangely enough for an *Aravani*, usually living in slums and engaging in illicit folk dances, she became part of mainstream high-level *Bharatanatyam* culture in Chennai. From this position, she shapes and confirms her non-normative identity within a normative space. She will never marry, now she knows, but it does not matter anymore, because her place is in the spiritual *milieu*. Through *Abhinaya* she constantly defines her identity as a woman who will not find a husband, but who daily expresses devotional love for god through a sacred dance. In "tradition", she found her own place as a transgender in Indian society: in "tradition" she found a space to re-invent her own world. If she partially continues to be out of the social normativity, this position is somehow legitimated through the high status of Bharatanatyam, and the tradition it narrates. She is at once time illicit and legitimate, normative and non-

normative and Bharatanatyam is the *locus* of agency that connects these opposite social realities.

It is in the same "in-between", that the experiences of Ponni and Anjali, two other *Aravani* dancers I interacted with during my field, have to be contextualised. While still connected to their community and still engaging in folk dance, through Bharatanatyam they now earn a living. They live in a slum on the outskirts of Chennai, where they teach this style mostly to "unprivileged" children. As they told me, the most important and tangible change that Bharatanatyam made in their lives, is related to the way people treat and consider them. 'Bharatanatyam was like a rebirth for me' - Anjali told me - 'I was an alcoholic and prostitute rejected by society and now I am considered as a *guru* and I am thanked everyday for sharing my dance knowledge' (07/08/13).

Before meeting Ponni, Anjali and Narthaki, I had the chance to spend some time with a common group of *Aravanis,* whose members engage only in folk dance, and live together in a very poor slum of Chennai. Since I knew that the people of this community could not speak English, I went to the place with some of my Tamil friends, so they could help us to communicate. The attitude and behaviours of my friends in that context, their distance from and fear of "these people", as some of them used to call this social group, strongly impressed me. After that, I met Ponni and Anjali and I went to visit them on a day they were giving class to the children living around. The respectful way in which both the children and their parents were treating them surprised me at first, compared with what I had experienced so far. There was a moment, in particular, that was very meaningful in expressing this feeling of respectfulness. Traditionally, before and after a Bharatanatyam class, the students sing *slokam* for thanking the divinities, they engage in a salutation to thank the sacred earth and finally they bow at the *guru*'s feet and devotionally touch them as the means through which the divine dance knowledge is transmitted. When the children began touching Ponni's feet and she was blessing them putting her hand on their heads, I deeply understood what Anjali meant when talking of Bharatanatyam as a re-birth. This dance legitimises who they are, practically changing in one instance the place they occupy in society as well as the modality in which people engage with them.

Narthaki, Ponni and Anjali are still part of a non-normative realm in terms of gender and thus in terms of social status. For them, as for many *Aravanis*, dance is a space where they can emphasise their femininity. As Marcom puts it, 'dance as an embodied, highly stylised and strongly effective performing art has the potential to be a particular gendered, and hence gendering, arena' (2013: 96). However, while the low level, unconsidered and sometimes

immorally erotic folk dances *Aravanis* usually engage in, somehow intensify their illicit status, the classical, traditional style Bharatanatyam, legitimises it. This dance makes the experiences of my collaborators "exceptional", creating a bridge of connection between the normative and the non-normative and legitimating their being in-between these two cultural spaces.

4.4 Bharatanatyam as a liminal space in Kothis' double identity

While Bharatanatyan is the important space that connects *Aravanis* to the legitimate, *Kothis* usually never cross that line. 'I thought many times of it'- Priya wrote to me one day on Facebook[22] - 'but I will not go for an operation because I like both lives very much, love BE a girl whenever I like [sic]' (13/03/14). S/he will not completely leave mainstream society with its norms and its privileges. 'It is very hard' – she said – 'to survive in India after getting operated, so due to fear of society I'm only doing it secretly' (13/03/14). She identifies herself as Priya Sherin, when she talks to me. She is Priya on her Facebook profile. But in everyday life he is just a man, who sometimes likes to dress as a woman. S/he is a *Kothi*: male in his normative life, cross-dresser in her secret one. As mentioned in chapter 3, *Kothis* do not leave society as *Aravanis* do, they literally live two parallels lives. They are not a defined group as *Aravanis*: they may have homosexual inclinations or not, they may be low or middle class (Marcom 2013: 90). What marks their status is their double identity.

Within their secret life, 'being *Kothi* is fundamentally about being feminine, which includes […] commonly some involvement in performing art as female; and other feminine/feminising behaviours such as doing housework' (Morcom, 2013: 90). When becoming females, dance is one of the main activities they engage in. As Marcom puts it '*Kothis* imitate female in many ways, but, dance can be seen as a particularly powerful part of gender performance – an arena par excellence for the constitution of gender – and, hence something that *Kothis* are drawn to appreciate and respect' (2013: 97). Within their secret life, they engage in sensual, erotic, feminine folk styles of dance. Everything they do as cross-dressed is perceived as illicit, dangerous and must thus remain secret. But what if the secret life become too complicated to manage and hide?

   I know Priya only though electronic *media*, especially Facebook. She had my contact through Anjali, who recently became her Bharatanatyam teacher together with Ponni. She contacted me simply to talk, show me some pictures of her, ask me about the research I did in

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[22] Popular worldwide social platform.

the summer of 2013 in Chennai. However we ended up quite soon talking about her secret, that only a few people know, and about the difficulty she had in the last year to find occasions for cross-dressing. As she wrote to me, 'due to some problems at home I didn't find any free time to dress up completely as Priya' (15/03/14). Her legitimate reality obstructed the illicit space of her gender exploration. Bharatanatyam then became a more normative space for this exploration. S/he began his training with Ponni and Anjali as a male, in daily life. With no need to cross dress, she engaged in narrative moments as well as in technical ones, 'trying to dance in a very feminine manner' (15/03/14). Through dance s/he likes to experience female roles s/he will never experience in everyday life, because s/he will never cross that line between the normative and the non-normative. In *Abhinaya* s/he becomes a faithful wife, a beautiful princess, a supreme goddess. As Marcom observes, '*Abhinaya* is always emphasised in performance by *Kothis* […] the female subject's specific words or emotions […] are enacted in stylised and hyper-feminine forms' (2013: 97). The impersonation of female roles can happen in everyday life, because Bharatanatyam is a classical, legitimate dance. It can happen through her male body, because in the mainstream view gender is not an issue in *Abhinaya*, it is all about acting. Bharatanatyam is a space in-between the normative and the non-normative secret reality of a *Kothi*. My collaborator daily engages in this exploration, while waiting for the next occasion to get fully dressed as Priya. In this double life, Bharatanatyam is a liminal space, between told and untold, seen and unseen, legitimate and illicit.

4.5 Multiple illicitness, multiple dances

This ethnographic narration moves through a thick network of multiple meanings, experiences, and lives which take form in the stories told and danced by my collaborators, largely different one from another, yet closely related. They all are stories of illicitness, of exception. Although the pronounced diversity characterises my collaborators, they all are linked by the illicit *status* of their gender identities and sexual behaviours. If the homosexual orientation of the dancers involved in the network of Queer activism is currently marked as immoral and illegal by section 377 and consequently perceived as such by the majority of the population, *Aravanis* and *Kothis* are totally or partially, openly or secretly, out of mainstream society. Although in different modalities, and with different aims, Bharatanatyam is the cultural space through which they all engage in a process of social legitimisation. This

process lies upon the colonial, nationalist creation of a dichotomy between legitimate and illicit, both in the field of gender/sexual morality and in the dance realm. As previously explored, my collaborators' identities and behaviours were and are currently marked as non-normative, since they are judged from the mainstream dichotomy male-man/female-woman and the heterononormativ system. At the same time, Bharatanatyam continues to be the classical Indian dance *par excellence* both on a national and a transnational level, the dance that transmits traditional Indian values through the ancient stories it tells. Looking at my collaborators' experiences through the frame of this dichotomy, the diversity of their dancing seems to be influenced and to influence at the same time, their different status of illicitness. If Bharatanatyam can somehow legitimise their non-normative behaviours, the possibilities and features of this process rest upon the complex interplay of class, economic and power dynamics that determine these social actors' places in society. In particular, as previously explored and as Marcom highlights, a 'crucial factor in the structuring of India's (male) sexual minorities is class […] *Hijra*[23] and *Kothis* are from the lower socio-economic strata […] men from the upper socioeconomic strata who are homoerotically inclined generally identify themselves as gay or bisexual' (2013: 90-91). Discourses of class and power are closely related to the different type of legitimisation these social actors seek.

The homosexual and bisexual dancers involved in LGBT activism, are part of an elevated socio-intellectual reality that somehow allows them to be queer. In a contemporary social reality that perceives same-sex love as immoral, illicit and punishable by law, to perform *Shringara* pieces is for a male dancer a matter of choice, a matter of transcending the mainstream or, simply, 'not caring about what people will tell about you' (Kiran, 11/08/2013). If queering Bharatanatyam is a relevant, yet dangerous modality of acting politically, from their social position they have the possibility to make that choice. Bharatanatyam is already part of their life, because part of their middle-class education. The legitimisation they seek, is the political, moral, legal equality of any gender and sexual orientation. Queering Bharatanatyam, they, choreutically and politically, theoretically and practically, confuse, de-construct and de-stabilise cultural boundaries. It is a deconstruction coming from their own awareness of those gender and sexuality discourses and their possibility to actualise them. It is, however, a destabilisation that seeks affirmation.

Aravanis subjects hardly can access Bharatanatyam, because of their limited socio-economic possibilities. Because of their hard daily life and their low level of instruction, they

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[23] Term to define transgender MtF (*Aravanis*) in other areas of India.

usually do not reflect much on gender and sexuality and what they really are; they just feel they have 'always been women, just in the wrong bodies' (Ponni, 08/08/13). In dance they seek a tangible, personal affirmation of their gender identity and their social *status*. Their aim, in *Abhinaya,* is not to confuse gender roles, neither do they want to show their cultural fixities, but to emphasise their femininity, in attitudes and gestures that define and confirm who they are. For them, as well as for *Kothis*, dance is a space where they may express femininity and make it become a social fact (Morcom, 2013:97). In Bharatanatyam, a classical, traditional space, they can legitimate their non-normative femininity. While for *Aravanis* this legitimisation can mean a tangible change in their social status, a connection to the mainstream, *Kothis*, who already have a normative life, use this legitimate space to keep the non-normative secret. My collaborators dance between the legitimate and the illicit. They both 'conform to societal pressures and struggle against them, sometimes striving for balance, sometimes courting disruption with pleasure' (Shay, 2009: 11). From their different realities, they all find in Bharatanatyam a space for action; from their multiples positions of illicitness, they all dance different stories, seeking legitimisation.

4.6 Bharatanatyam *Abhinaya*, a cultural space of double agency

When exploring these experiences and meanings through discourses of legitimacy/illicitness and inclusion/exclusion, Bharatanatyam and especially *Abhinaya* take form as cultural spaces in which my collaborators can move between these dualities. Through their dancing they can, in different modalities, reach mainstream society, attempting to change it or to create a space for themselves in it. In their *Abhinaya* narrations, they can connect to the normative, while remaining somehow, illicit. The stories they tell, the movements they make, become spaces of cultural agency, *loci* where they can practically move between the domination by social relations of power, and the possibility for (partial) liberation from these forces (Cain, Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, 2003: 5). In particular, getting close to their experiences, I had the opportunity to explore the specific characteristics that make *Bharatanatyam,* both on a choreutic and a political level, a legitimate space for the performance of the illicit, a double space of social agency. If on a choreutic level, *Abhinaya* performances provides dancers with the possibility of border-crossing, from a political point of view this exploration and expression seem to be legitimized by the high social status of *Bharatanatyam,* and the tradition it is supposed to tell.

On the one hand, as a theatrical, choreographic space, *Abhinaya* becomes, in Desmond's words, 'a liminal space, a safe in-between where a variety of sexualities and desires can be symbolically rendered through the play of imagination combined with the articulation of the body' (2001, 21). It allows a homosexual dancer to express his love for a same-sex subject, in a more symbolic and less dangerous way than in daily life, attempting to stimulate 'a fundamental re-thinking of the ways in which heterosexuality is positioned as central and normative' (Desmond, 2001: 11). Similarly, this dance provides the few *Aravavanis* and *Kothis* who can access it with a space to explore female attitudes and feelings, in an emphasised manner that re-enforces their "being women". On the other hand, as a tradition, or a selected representational ideal, *Abhinaya* can be used as a source of legitimisation (Kastrinou-Theodoropoulou, 2009: 5). As anthropologist Maria Anthi Kastrinou-Theodoropoulou points out, 'ideas of tradition and authentic tradition are directly connected with aspects of power […] as well as legitimization of historical memory' (2009: 5). It is indeed, to this tradition that the "Queer Arts Movement" appeals in order to show people that queer behaviours were always part of their culture; it is through this tradition that Narthaki was re-born through Bharatatyam as Amba through Siva; it is the elevated *status* of this dance that makes Ponni's and Anjali's feet sacred and allows Priya to dance in daily light. The modality in which Bharatanatyam is perceived in Indian society, legitimates what social actors can do within its choreutic space. This legitimacy based on tradition makes this space of agency larger and stronger, especially with regard to the illicitness the characterises my collaborators. Bharatanatyam, is for these sexual minorities a double space of social agency, characterized at once by the choreutic possibilities of crossing cultural boundaries and the socio-political power to do it. Furthermore, it is a potential space to stimulate social change, a place ' to mark presence' (Chatterjee, 2014), the presence of the illicit within the legitimate.

Conclusion

The night before leaving Chennai, I had a last meeting with Maharaja, a Tamil friend who, as mentioned earlier, often helped me in communicating with non English-speakers, and, in particular, with my *Aravani* collaborators. That night, we met for a cup of *chai*, and for a walk in Besant-Nagar beach, a venue where families, groups of friends and couples use to spend their late afternoons and evenings. Sitting on a sidewalk, looking at the ocean and the children playing with the water, he suddenly said, 'before you leave, I want to thank you' (28/08/13). He told me that, at the beginning, he did not really like what I was asking him to do, to come with me to meet "those people" as he used to call *Aravanis*. He said that he was uncomfortable and scared because everybody thinks that their hard life at the bottom of society makes them angry and dangerous. Before I could apologise for having asked him so many times to come with me, he continued saying that however he wanted to thank me, 'because you made me confront them, talk to them and I could see that they can be very good people like Ponni and Anjali, and this made me change my consideration of something within my society that I was just ignoring' (Maharaja, 28/08/13). What Maharaja said was deep and meaningful to me. It made me feel that, through my ethnographic work, the illicit stories of my collaborators could really reach people, that their voices could be heard, stimulating thoughts and reflections. It enhanced my motivation to proceed with this exploration and narration, so that someone else, in India or elsewhere, may hear the voices of these dancers and listen to their stories.

My dissertation constitutes the means of this narration. Through the words and the movements of my collaborators I have attempted to unveil experiences that tend to remain untold, unseen, hidden behind the shadow of the mainstream. This paper tells stories of moving between cultural fixities, of dancing between the normative and the non-normative, the legitimate and the illicit, of unmarking wrongness and marking presence. While Bharatanatyam is known and explored, taught and performed, shared, transmitted and well discussed among dancers and scholars nationally and transnationally, this ethnographic work attempts to go beyond a mainstream realm and reveal non-normative Bharatanatyam spaces. While the possibility to explore gender and sexuality across boundaries in *Abhinaya* is ignored, denied or perceived as irrelevant by the majority of dancers, the social actors I focused on in this ethnographic exploration perceive this possibility of border-crossing as meaningful and real. Far from being simply an enactment of roles on stage, *Abhinaya* becomes for these dancers a way of connecting with mainstream society, a space for them

where they may act, shaping and re-shaping themselves and their worlds. On a daily basis, my collaborators dance between the illicit and the legitimate, between cultural boundaries of gender, sexuality, social status and respectability. Dance is the space through which they act and seek change. As anthropologist Andrée Grau reminds us, 'dance is a social fact, conveying meanings through human interaction; thus it reflects ideologies and worldviews. Yet dance can also be used to explore and manipulate the social reality, with the potential to influence decision-making in other social contexts and occasionally to prefigure political actions' (1990: 165).

Through looking at my collaborators' dancing, not only we may explore unseen, non-normative spaces, but we may also re-consider the normative reality and observe it from a different, critical perspective. Showing illicit alternatives to the mainstream, showing that, at times, the illicit can become partially legitimate, my collaborators' experiences highlight the complexity of gender, class and political dynamics that, as we explored, currently shape the accessibility and practice of Bharatanatyam, especially in the specific context of my investigation. In the city of Chennai, where, as Soneji puts it, 'the invention of South Indian heritage is both *seen* and *told* through Bharatanatyam [and] the gestures of every dancer seem loaded with political significance' (2012: 222), the illicit stories which I narrate, bring to light the struggle between the allowed and the forbidden, the moral and the immoral, between exclusion and inclusion, which informs this national heritage. While in the professional Bharatanatyam realm male dancers simply do not perform *shringara* pieces without questioning why and while the gender identity of *Aravanis* or *Kothis* is thought not to fit with the high status of this dance, so that they normally engage in low level folk dances, my collaborators constitute the exceptions that can stimulate queries and reflections. Their experiences highlight how this dance is currently shaped by dynamics of the allowed/forbidden and inclusion/exclusion in terms of both gender and class, and how these dynamics are based upon colonial and post-colonial discourses on purity and tradition. As Morcom puts it, through telling 'untold stories and revealing unseen cultures [not only we can] present a more accurate picture of the terrain of Indian performing arts, [but we also] aim to give new perspectives on different phases of Indian modernity and concomitant questions of belonging and power, from the colonial, to the post-colonial, to the neoliberal-postcolonial' (2013: 27).

At the same time, my collaborators' experiences also show how the same colonial and post-colonial dynamics that constructed Bharatanatyam through discourses of legitimacy and purity, created in this dance a potential space for those who are put in the realm of the illicit

to connect with the legitimate. They show how, dance can be 'an object of cultural appropriation, manipulated into complicity by an Orientalist agenda, while incorporating at the same time a quite rare and unyielding potential (or promise) for social, cultural and sexual resistance' (Karayanni, 2004: 7). On a choreutic level, the replacement of the female impersonator by athletic, virile men, combined with the transformation of the style by upper-caste women in order to make it suitable for both female and male, created a space where male dancers must confront the performance of hyper-femininity and the expression of love for male gods and heroes. For some dancers it is merely about acting; for others it may be a struggle between the expectation of being masculine and strong while enacting at the same time the role of a graceful princess; for my collaborators it is a place to explore and express who they are, a place to act. From this place, they can narrate the story of a queer love and attempt to change the mainstream view on homosexual relationships, or they can experience things that some of them would hardly experience in everyday life, like marriage for an *Aravani*. On a political level, the invention of Bharatanatyam as a classical, pure dance that narrates tradition and Indian values, paradoxically legitimises these performances as well as the social status of those subjects who can have access to them instead confining them to lower folk or popular dance styles. Hence, as I argue, in its contemporary shape, Bharatanatyam becomes a double space of social agency, where cultural borders may be crossed within tradition. Through Bharatanatyam, in different modalities, my collaborators mark their presence in society and, act for a process of change. *Bharatanatyam* is the space through which they speak, the legitimate tool that gives voice to the illicit. Furthermore, this choreutic form, is the means through which I attempted, within this ethnographic exploration, to tell their stories, to bring the readers close to their worlds, their meanings, as they shared them with me.

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