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ARTICLE: SPECIAL ISSUE ON REFIGURING BODIES THAT MATTER: SEX, GENDER, AND ALTERNATIVE BODILY IDENTITIES IN HINDU TRADITIONS

Vedantam vs. Venus: Drag, Impersonation, and the Limitations of *Gender Trouble*

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Abstract Drawing on the seminal work of feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler, this article compares the practice of gender impersonation in the South Indian dance form of Kuchipudi with American drag performance. While impersonation in Kuchipudi and American drag performance arise from radically distinct gendered, cultural, and religious contexts, the juxtaposition of these two seemingly disparate spheres generates a useful framework for comparison that illuminates new ways of interpreting gender and caste in contemporary South India. Focusing on the Kuchipudi dancer Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma and the drag ball performer Venus Xtravaganza, this article analyzes the gender and caste norms of Kuchipudi dance in Telugu-speaking South India while outlining the limitations of Butler's theory of gender performativity.

Keywords Kuchipudi · impersonation · drag · Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma · *Paris Is Burning*

I first met Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma in the summer of 2006 in the South Indian village of Kuchipudi. As a student of the eponymous classical dance form that arises from this village, I was well aware of Satyanarayana Sarma's reputation as a Kuchipudi dancer skilled in donning a woman's guise, or *strī-vēṣam*, particularly during the height of his career in the 1960s and 1970s. As I sat on Satyanarayana Sarma's veranda and listened to him talk on that hot summer afternoon, I remember being struck by the dissonance between the appearance of this elderly bald man clad in a white *dhotī* who sat before me and his reputation as the living embodiment of Satyabhāmā, the heroine of the Kuchipudi dance drama

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Bhāmākalāpam. However, I soon forgot about the incongruous juxtaposition of Satyanarayana Sarma's bald head and his skilled female portrayal as he suddenly began to sing the lyrics of Satyabhāmā's *praveśa daruvu*, introductory song, accompanied by hand gestures and facial expressions.

When witnessing Satyanarayana Sarma's impromptu enactment of Satyabhāmā on the veranda of his house, I recalled the works of American feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler. Familiar with Butler's well-known 1990 publication *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, I found striking parallels between Butler's theorizations of drag and Satyanarayana Sarma's enactment of Satyabhāmā, particularly because both drag and Kuchipudi impersonation feature the donning of a gender guise in the context of a staged performance. However, I also found distinct differences: the drag performers who Butler theorizes enact nonnormative portrayals of gender and sexuality, and they often perform in discrete locales, such as underground drag balls. By contrast, Kuchipudi impersonators such as Satyanarayana Sarma belong to a select group of hereditary brahmin families and enjoy a privileged class and caste status. As a dominant-caste and upper-class male dancer and as the embodiment of normative brahmin masculinity (Kamath 2019a), Satyanarayana Sarma represents the antithesis of the American drag performer.

The juxtaposition of the Kuchipudi impersonator and the American drag performer forms the basic framework for this article. While impersonation in the Kuchipudi village and drag performance in urban America arise from radically distinct gendered, cultural, and religious contexts, the juxtaposition of these two seemingly disparate spheres generates a useful framework for comparison that illuminates new ways of reading both impersonation and drag. As the theoretical background that frames my analysis, I begin by highlighting Butler's theories concerning drag and gender performativity in her publications *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993). I then turn to the context of Kuchipudi, a Telugu dance style in which the donning of the *strī-vēṣam* is an integral component of its early performance repertoire. When exploring the Kuchipudi practices of impersonation alongside American drag performance, I ask: How does the practice of impersonation in the Kuchipudi village differ from drag performance in urban America? How are gender norms shaped differently across these two contexts? Finally, how does Kuchipudi impersonation challenge Butler's theoretical articulations of gender performativity? In addressing these questions, I conclude by suggesting that unlike American drag performance, Kuchipudi impersonation creates, rather than subverts, normative gender ideals. In the Kuchipudi village, the brahmin male performer is not really a man until he impersonates a woman.

Gender Is Burning, Paris Is Burning

Judith Butler is undoubtedly one of the most influential scholars in contemporary American feminist theory. In what is perhaps her most well-known publication, *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler created an upheaval in American feminist circles by

putting forth the provocative theory of gender performativity. Butler begins *Gender Trouble* by arguing for a separation of the categories of sex and gender:

> When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one (1990: 6).

Butler undermines the syllogism of sex is to nature as gender is to culture by arguing that it is actually gender that gives rise to the notion of sex. "Gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive,' prior to culture" (Butler 1990: 7). Rather than viewing gender as the cultural imposition on sexed bodies in the manner of many second-wave feminists before her, Butler argues that gender *creates* the illusion of a "natural sex."

The heart of Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* arises with her analysis of drag, tucked in the end of a chapter entitled "Subversive Bodily Acts." Butler begins her discussion of drag by citing the work of Esther Newton (1979), whose publication *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* is an important ethnographic study of professional drag queens in America. In her study, Newton argues that drag subculture questions the "naturalness" of the sex-role system by suggesting that "if sex-role behavior can be achieved by the 'wrong' sex, it logically follows that it is in reality also achieved, not inherited by the 'right' sex" (1979: 103). Newton states:

> At its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says, "appearance is an illusion." Drag says, "my 'outside' appearance is feminine, but my essence 'inside' [the body] is masculine." At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; "my appearance 'outside' [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence 'inside' [myself] is feminine" (1979: 103).

Butler nuances Newton's claims by arguing that the relationship between the imitation and the original gender identity is more complicated than it first appears. "The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed" (Butler 1990: 137). Butler elaborates on this claim by suggesting that drag performance involves three dimensions: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. She argues, "If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance" (Butler 1990: 137).

Following this discussion, Butler coins her famous maxim, which contains the seed of her theory of gender performativity: "*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*" (1990: 137; emphasis in the original). This assertion claims that by enacting an exaggerated version of gender, the drag performer does not simply parody a particular gender identity but in fact parodies, and thus destabilizes, the very notion of an original gender. Butler (1990: 138) clarifies that her notion of gender parody does not

assume an original that is to be imitated; instead, the parody is of the very notion of an original itself.

Implicit in Butler's notion of gender performativity is the idea that there is no natural essence that gender expresses. "Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis;…the construction 'compels' our belief in its necessity and naturalness" (Butler 1990: 140). For Butler, the fact that "gender reality is created through the sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a 'true' masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character" (1990: 141). Drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, Butler argues that gender creates the illusion of a "natural sex" that aids in concealing its own genesis.[1]

It is essential to underscore that for Butler gender is not simply a temporally bounded performance, such as the daily routine of donning one's clothing. Rather, adapting J. L. Austin's (1975) notion of the performative utterance,[2] she proposes that gender is *performative* inasmuch as it is constructed through a stylized repetition of acts. Butler elaborates on the performative nature of gender by arguing that it is "*a corporeal style*, an 'act,' as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where '*performative*' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (1990: 139; emphasis in the original). She continues:

> Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through *a stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gender self (1990: 140; emphasis in the original).

It is through a stylized repetition of acts that the possibility for disruption occurs. "The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat" (Butler 1990: 141). In short, the potential failure of gender repetition allows for instances of its destabilization.

Butler concludes that "genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived" (1990: 141). We can surmise from *Gender Trouble* the following five important points: (1) drag performance reveals the imitative structure of gender; (2) gender is a parody of the notion of an original; (3) gender conceals its own genesis by creating the notion of a "natural sex"; (4) gender is performative and involves a stylized repetition of acts; and, finally, (5) the potential failure to repeat gender enables its subversion.

Butler's theory of gender performativity generated debates within scholarly circles, particularly with respect to her emphasis on the subversive nature of drag

[1] Butler elaborates on this connection to Derrida in the Preface (1999) of the 2008 edition of *Gender Trouble* (2008: xv).

[2] While Butler does not cite Austin's work in *Gender Trouble*, she explores the relationship between speech acts in the work of Austin and Derrida in her book *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997). See also Mahmood 2005: 19, 162.

performance.[3] It is only in *Bodies That Matter* (1993a), Butler's second publication, that we find a more nuanced analysis of gender performativity and drag. In a chapter entitled "Gender Is Burning," Butler reimagines drag as not necessarily subversive but rather ambivalent in scope. She writes:

> Although many readers understood *Gender Trouble* to be arguing for the proliferation of drag performances as a way of subverting dominant gender norms, I want to underscore that there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms. At best, it seems, drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes (Butler 1993a: 125).

Butler's claims here are important for understanding the ambivalent nature of drag, which expresses the ability to both subvert and resignify gender norms.

In order to provide a concrete example for her analysis, Butler turns to *Paris Is Burning* (1991), a documentary film directed by Jennie Livingston that features drag ball performances in Harlem, New York.[4] As depicted in this film, drag balls are generally private, underground performances that provide opportunities for members of various "houses," or drag families, to compete against one another by showcasing their talents in costume, dance performance, and overall presentation. The performers, who are primarily from New York's Black and Latinx queer communities, compete under a variety of categories, including business executive, prep school student, high fashion model, and military personnel. The performers of these drag balls impersonate not only different categories of gender but also distinct notions of class and race. "Realness" functions as the standard for judging these performances; the closer a performer approximates "realness" in any given category, the more likely that performer is to walk away with a golden trophy, the coveted prize of the drag ball.

In her analysis of Livingston's film in *Bodies That Matter*, Butler takes up the topic of realness when stating:

> What determines the effect of realness is the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect. This effect is itself the result of an embodiment of norms, a reiteration of norms,…a norm which is at once a figure, a figure of a body, which is no particular body, but a morphological ideal that remains the standard which regulates the performance, but which no performance fully approximates (1993a: 129).

Although these drag performances never fully approximate normative gender ideals, Butler argues that they appear to "work" because the effect of realness cannot be "read." According to the drag performers of Livingston's film, for a performance to

[3] Scholars who have critiqued *Gender Trouble* include Nussbaum (1999), Mahmood (2005), Reddy (2005), Prosser (2006), and Drouin (2008).

[4] In this section Butler engages with hooks's (1992) critique of *Paris Is Burning*.

work, it means that "reading," or the "art of insult," is no longer possible.[5] Butler ties together the concepts of reading and realness by stating:

> On the contrary, when what appears and how it is "read" diverge, the artifice of the performance can be read as artifice; the ideal splits off from its appropriation. But the impossibility of reading means that the artifice works, the approximation of realness appears to be achieved, the body performing and the ideal performed appear indistinguishable (1993a: 129).

The next level of reading is "throwing shade," a term that is now commonplace in the American vernacular. As one drag performer in the film, Dorian Corey, notes, "Shade is 'I don't tell you you're ugly, but I don't have to tell you because you know you're ugly.' And that's shade" (McGlotten 2016: 265).

Butler's discussion of realness and the impossibility of reading is most apparent in the instances of two drag performers in Livingston's film—Venus Xtravaganza and Octavia St. Laurent—who both attempt to approximate realness through the image of the high fashion model. Both performers describe their desire to become famous and wealthy, similar to the high fashion models they idolize, and attempt to mimic this ideal by wearing expensive clothing and maintaining a thin body image. As a trans Latinx woman from the House of Xtravaganza, Venus describe herself as follows: "I would like to be a spoiled rich white girl. They get what they want, whenever they want it. They don't have to really struggle with finances, nice things, nice clothes—they don't have to have that as a problem." Octavia, a Black trans woman from the House of St. Laurent, explicitly articulates her desire for class mobility throughout the documentary, particularly when saying, "I want to be somebody. I mean, I am somebody. I just want to be a rich somebody." In comparison to Octavia, Venus not only wants to dress as a high fashion model but also to live her life as "a whole woman, to find a man and have a house in the suburbs with a washing machine" (Butler 1993a: 133). This pursuit turns out to be tragic for Venus, who we learn in the final scenes of the film is found dead under a hotel bed strangled to death, presumably by one of her clients.

When analyzing the figure of Venus Xtravaganza, Butler wonders whether Venus succeeds in *denaturalizing* or *resignifying* normative conceptions of gender and sexuality. Although Venus's gender performances appear to resist dominant notions of gender and sexual norms, Butler argues that they do not necessarily imply a liberation from normative hegemonic constraints. Venus *denaturalize*s the norms of gender and sexuality through her performances as the high fashion model, and yet she also *resignifies* these norms through her domestic ambitions of finding a man and settling down in a suburban household with a washing machine. Perhaps more important than these mundane desires are the implications of Venus's death itself.

> The painfulness of [Venus's] death at the end of the film suggests as well that there are cruel and fatal social constraints on denaturalization. As much as she crosses gender, sexuality, and race performatively, the hegemony that reinscribes the privileges of normative femininity and whiteness wields the

[5] The concept of "reading" is a practice of the drag ball itself and is referred to as "the art of insult" by senior drag ball performer Dorian Corey in Livingston's film (1991).

> final power to *re*naturalize Venus's body and cross out that prior crossing, an erasure that is her death (Butler 1993a: 133).

Butler suggests that the normative powers of gender and race ultimately undo Venus's subversive gender crossing and lead to the resignification of gender norms through her tragic demise. Even for Livingston, a white filmmaker whose camera problematically assumes a politically "neutral" gaze, Venus's death serves as an unremarkable postscript (hooks 1992: 150–51). In her critique of *Paris Is Burning*, bell hooks writes, "Having served the purpose of 'spectacle' the film abandons [Venus]. The audience does not see Venus after the murder. There are no scenes of grief. To put it crassly, her dying is upstaged by spectacle. Death is not entertaining" (1992: 155). As with the other drag performers in the film, Venus's precarity should not be upstaged by the spectacle and spectacular subversion of drag.

Brahmin Men and *Bhāmākalāpam*

Thousands of miles away from the underground drag balls of Harlem lives a community of brahmin male performers skilled at donning the *strī-vēṣam*, or a woman's guise. The gender enactment, or *impersonation*, of female characters by Vaidikī brahmin men has reportedly been a characteristic feature of Kuchipudi dance since its inception.[6] Due to an original prohibition against female performers, dominant-caste male dancers utilized highly stylized gestures and costumes to portray both male and female characters.[7] Kuchipudi brahmin dancers performed in *vēṣam*s, or guises, in dance dramas focused on Hindu religious themes, such as *Bhāmākalāpam*, which features Satyabhāmā, the wife of the Hindu deity Kṛṣṇa.

Before discussing the specifics of the Kuchipudi context, it is necessary to contextualize my use of the term "impersonation." During my fieldwork, scholars and practitioners of Kuchipudi dance utilized the English term "female impersonation" as a translation of the Telugu idiom for taking on the *strī-vēṣam*, or a woman's guise, within performance. Drawing directly on these vernacular usages, I employ the term "impersonation" as a broad analytic category that, in the Indian context, connotes the practice of donning a gender *vēṣam* (guise) either onstage or in everyday life.[8] One potential critique of the term "impersonation" is that it might carry a connotation of "unreal" or "inauthentic" performance. However, feminist

[6] The dominant-caste males from the Kuchipudi village self-identify as Vaidikī, a sect of Telugu-speaking Smārta brahmins whose occupational practices traditionally focus on Vedic rituals and study.

[7] While it is difficult to ascertain the exact circumstances of early performance practices of Kuchipudi prior to the nineteenth century due to a dearth of sources, it is evident that as a result of female exclusion Kuchipudi brahmin males have been donning a woman's guise, or *strī-vēṣam*, in order to portray characters such as Satyabhāmā in *Bhāmākalāpam* and Uṣā in the *yakṣagāna Uṣā-pariṇayam* from the late nineteenth century onwards. In comparison with the brahmin males from the village of Kuchipudi, their female brahmin counterparts (wives, daughters, mothers) often occupy domestic roles and rarely participate as performers in the arts, aside from a few notable exceptions. See Kamath (2019a: Chapter 5) for a detailed discussion of Kuchipudi brahmin women.

[8] See the introduction to Kamath and Lothspeich (2022) for a robust discussion of impersonation across South Asia. See also Flueckiger's (2013) discussion of *vēṣam*.

theorizations of gender performativity, particularly the work of Butler, propose the notion that gender performances such as drag unmask gender itself as inherently performative, thereby suggesting that *all* gender may carry valences of inauthenticity or constructedness. I do, however, distinguish impersonation from the phenomenon of drag, which has its own complicated history in Western performance. As Jennifer Drouin successfully argues in her taxonomies of cross-dressing, passing, and drag on the Shakespearean stage, cross-dressing is a theatrical convention of donning a gender guise that attempts to "imitate the 'real,'" while drag is a comedic performance that "self-referentially draws attention to its not-quite-rightness" (2008: 23, 25). Similar to Drouin's understanding of cross-dressing, I use impersonation, particularly as it is practiced in the Kuchipudi village, to connote a dramatic convention that attempts to produce a plausible gender enactment onstage. Although drag and impersonation both refer to, in most cases, dramatic performance contexts, drag, particularly as it is characterized by American feminist scholars, attempts to *parody* gender while impersonation attempts to *approximate* gender. As a result, the usage of these terms should not be conflated.[9]

Why brahmin male performers and why *Bhāmākalāpam*? According to the historical accounts told by Kuchipudi practitioners, in the year 1678, during a tour of his kingdom, the Nawab of Golconda Abul Hassan Qutb Shah, also known as Tana Shah, saw a troupe of brahmin men performing a dance drama at the village of Kuchipudi in the Krishna district in Telugu South India.[10] He was apparently so enthralled by the performance that he gave away the village as a land grant to the brahmin families who dedicated their lives to this art (Jonnalagadda 1996: 39).[11] The story of Tana Shah's land grant is still told in the village of Kuchipudi to this day and is a point of legitimation for its inhabitants, particularly the descendants of the brahmin families who are thought to have received the land grant.

The next historical record of Kuchipudi arises from the reign of Nizam Ali Khan, also known as Asaf Jah II (Jonnalagadda 1996: 40). In 1763 a property dispute arose among the families living in the Kuchipudi village in the Divi Seema area of the Krishna district, and members of these families appealed to the Nizam, the current ruler at the time, who appointed Mosalikanti Kamoji Pantulu and Kandregula Jogipantulu as his agents. A settlement was reached, and a property division document was drafted on August 24, 1763, indicating that the families with the following fifteen surnames were legitimate residents of the Kuchipudi village: Bhagavatula, Bokka, Darbha, Hari, Josyula, Mahankali, Pasumarti, Peddibhatla, Polepeddi, Vallabhajosyula, Vedantam, Vempati, Vemu, Venukunti, and Yeleswarapu (Jonnalagadda 1996: 40). Descendants of these brahmin families continue to

[9] See Halberstam 1998: 232.

[10] Due to the separation of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in 2014, I utilize the broader term "Telugu South India" rather than indicating a specific state location. The Kuchipudi village is currently located in the state of Andhra Pradesh, in an area that is identified as "coastal Andhra."

[11] Telugu poet-scholar Arudra questions the historicity of Tana Shah's land grant in the title of his 1994 essay, "Lingering Questions and Some Fashionable Fallacies." In an earlier essay published in 1989, "Background and Evolution of Kuchipudi Dance," Arudra casts doubt on the location of the Kuchipudi village by positing three possible locations for the village. His research reveals the contentious history of Kuchipudi and counters contemporary practitioner accounts.

live in the village of Kuchipudi today, and they are accorded a special significance as "hereditary" Kuchipudi dancers, a term that I will utilize to designate them in this article.[12]

Just as brahmin men were the first to enact the characters of Kuchipudi dance dramas, *Bhāmākalāpam* was the first dance drama to be performed. The dance drama *Bhāmākalāpam* holds a unique place in the Kuchipudi imagination due to its composer: Siddhendra, the purported author of *Bhāmākalāpam*, is also thought to be the founding saint of the Kuchipudi dance style.[13] While Kuchipudi practitioners may point to Sanskrit textual sources—in particular, Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, a Sanskrit treatise on dramaturgy and stagecraft dating to perhaps the third century—as the foundations of Kuchipudi, the history of Kuchipudi dance is a narrative that, more often than not, begins with Siddhendra.[14] As the purported author of *Bhāmākalāpam*, Siddhendra holds a unique place in the Kuchipudi imagination for his role in establishing and propagating this dance style. Siddhendra's significance is evident in his hagiography, which includes standard motifs found across the life stories of *bhakti* saints, including a trial and vision of god (Jackson 1991: 12–20). According to Siddhendra's hagiography, he was crossing a river to meet his new bride and her family when he was caught in a torrential storm. Siddhendra prayed to Kṛṣṇa for safe passage, and after reaching the other side of the river, he had a divine vision of Kṛṣṇa with his consort Satyabhāmā. Siddhendra envisioned himself as Satyabhāmā, the devotee and beloved of Kṛṣṇa. Soon his songs, which featured Satyabhāmā's love and separation from Kṛṣṇa, came to be known as *Bhāmākalāpam* (literally, "the story of Bhāmā"). The hagiography continues:

> Siddhendra traveled to the nearby town of Kuchelapuram and taught his dance drama to a group of talented young brahmin boys. Siddhendra then took a vow from all the boys of Kuchelapuram that they would continue to enact *Bhāmākalāpam* at least once every year. They assured him that they would continue to enact the dance drama for generations to come. Thus, it is until this day that *Bhāmākalāpam* continues to survive in the village of Kuchelapuram, now known as Kuchipudi.[15]

Two important points from Siddhendra's hagiography are necessary to underscore here: (1) Siddhendra's gender identification with the character of Satyabhāmā; and (2) Siddhendra's writing of *Bhāmākalāpam* and subsequent propagation of this

[12] As Arudra indicates, the list of these "hereditary" Kuchipudi families seems to have been codified in this 1763 property document (1994: 31), although it is Tana Shah's earlier land grant of 1678 that remains of primary importance in the living memory of the inhabitants of the Kuchipudi village.

[13] See Arudra (1994), Jonnalagadda (1996), Putcha (2015), and Kamath (2019a, 2019b) for a discussion of the controversies regarding the historicity of Siddhendra.

[14] The invocation of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is part of a postcolonial grounding of Kuchipudi within the boundaries of "classical Indian dance." For a discussion of the classicization of Kuchipudi dance, see Putcha 2013 and Kamath 2023. See Soneji (2012), Putcha (2015, 2022), and Thakore (2022) for a discussion of the intersections of Kuchipudi and Kalavantulu (courtesan) dance. Allen (1997) and Soneji (2010) provide a broader context for the revival of Indian dance—in particular, the style of Bharatanatyam in South India.

[15] This hagiography draws on Rao (1992) and Acharya and Sarabhai (1992), as well as the dissertation by Indian dance critic Kothari (1977). The full version of the hagiography is found in Kamath 2019a: 38–39.

dance drama among the young brahmin boys of Kuchipudi (previously known as Kuchelapuram).

Drawing on the gender role-play that is a common trope in *bhakti* poetry, Kuchipudi retellings of Siddhendra's story emphasize the saint's identification with Satyabhāmā. For example, dancer Uma Rama Rao writes, "[Siddhendra] thought that every devotee was a consort of Lord Krishna and Krishna was a Loka Bharta (husband). [Siddhendra] placed himself in the position of Satyabhāmā, who could not stand the separation from her Lord even for a moment" (1992: 29). According to contemporary retellings of Siddhendra's life story, the legendary Kuchipudi sage, like other *bhakti* saints, projects himself into the voice of a woman, in this case Satyabhāmā, awaiting her absentee lover Kṛṣṇa (Hawley 2000: 240). Siddhendra's gender identification in his poetic writings sets the stage for the practice of impersonation that is integral to Kuchipudi performance.

The second important aspect of Siddhendra's hagiography is the vow to Siddhendra by the young brahmin inhabitants of the Kuchipudi village to propagate Kuchipudi dance more broadly, and *Bhāmākalāpam* in particular. This vow is instantiated in the contemporary period in the prescription, ascribed to Siddhendra himself, that every male from a hereditary Kuchipudi family is required to dance Satyabhāmā's role in *Bhāmākalāpam* at least once in his life.

The hagiography of Siddhendra, particularly the two aspects that I have highlighted, sets an important expectation for brahmin men from hereditary Kuchipudi families: the brahmin men of the Kuchipudi village are required to don Satyabhāmā's role at least once in their life in order to live up to their vow to Siddhendra. In doing so, they mirror the hagiography of their legendary founding saint, who identifies with Satyabhāmā, the lovesick devotee of Kṛṣṇa. The hagiography of Siddhendra creates an expectation for Kuchipudi brahmin men, which brings together issues of performance and gender, along with elements of devotion. The donning of Satyabhāmā's *strī-vēṣam* thus constitutes a critical aspect of the performative, gendered, and religious identities of brahmin male dancers in the Kuchipudi village, specifically due to its associations with the legendary saint Siddhendra. Donning the *strī-vēṣam* is thus not only a process of visual transformation through costume and makeup, but, perhaps more importantly, it is a matter of establishing gender norms and religious authority in the Kuchipudi village.

Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma and Satyabhāmā

The consummate performer who is synonymous with the practice of impersonation in the Kuchipudi village, and with the Kuchipudi dance tradition more broadly, is Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma.[16] As described in the opening section of this article, Satyanarayana Sarma exhibited an ease at donning Satyabhāmā's *strī-vēṣam*, and his skills of impersonation gained him critical acclaim both within and outside

[16] This section draws on a detailed discussion of Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma in Kamath 2019a, chapters 1–2.

the village of Kuchipudi. In fact, the rhythm of life in Kuchipudi seemed to be dictated by Satyanarayana Sarma's presence, or absence, in the village. During the course of my fieldwork in the Kuchipudi village in 2010, Satyanarayana Sarma was conspicuously present in his absence, as I waited hoping for his potential reappearance in public life after minor surgery in January of that year. When he finally reappeared to conduct morning rituals at the local Śiva temple, the priest at the adjacent Siddhendra temple quickly motioned to me, excitedly pointing out Satyanarayana Sarma's distinctive figure. Clad in a carefully ironed off-white silk *dhotī* and upper cloth, with three distinctive strokes of *vibhūti*, or sacred ash, covering his forehead, Satyanarayana Sarma circumambulated the temple and conversed casually with the priests. I was surprised by Satyanarayana Sarma's fine attire, which was distinct from the white cotton (and often unkempt) *dhotī*s of many of my other elderly brahmin male informants. Through his dress alone, Satyanarayana Sarma seemed to establish himself as the embodiment of Brahmanical and upper-class masculinity.

When I approached Satyanarayana Sarma to conduct a formal video-recorded interview, he politely declined, stating that his health was still fragile, and he was unable to speak at length about any subject. Disappointed, particularly because Satyanarayana Sarma had assured me a few months prior to my stay in Kuchipudi that he would speak with me, I became resolved to obtain a formal interview to supplement the informal discussions that I had with him in previous years (2006, 2007, and 2009). I asked Ravi Balakrishna, Satyanarayana Sarma's only direct disciple living in the village, to help me obtain a formal interview; he tried, but Satyanarayana Sarma resolutely refused. Frustrated, I left for Chennai to complete additional fieldwork but returned again within a month's time, only to find Satyanarayana Sarma's insistence upon silence unwavering. My interlocutors, particularly those dancers and instructors centered around the state-funded institution, Siddhendra Kalakshetra, where I was staying, knew of my frustrations and empathized with my situation, and yet no one was willing to intervene on my behalf. It was clear that Satyanarayana Sarma resided at the peak of the power hierarchy within the brahmin performance community of the Kuchipudi village and was impervious to influence by anyone. When I returned to the village a year later, I learned that Satyanarayana Sarma's health had been restored, and he had given several interviews for a documentary film production, *I Am Satyabhama*, featuring his life. I was finally able to get a formal interview with him in January 2011. However, the principal purpose of this vignette is to highlight Satyanarayana Sarma's authoritative status within the Kuchipudi village. While the other brahmins of the village were often dependent on interactions with village outsiders to support their teaching and performances, Satyanarayana Sarma was able to curate his public interactions with a greater degree of independence. If anything, village life seemed to revolve around his comings and goings. This status is directly tied to his exceptional ability in donning the *strī-vēṣam*, and more specifically the guise of Satyabhāmā.

Born on September 9, 1935, Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma began learning dance at a very young age from his elder brother, Vedantam Prahlada Sarma. By the age of fourteen, he had learned most of Satyabhāmā's character in *Bhāmākalāpam*

from his brother, but the elders of the village felt that he was not ready for public performance. According to an essay written by theater scholar Modali Nagabhushana Sarma, one day when Satyanarayana Sarma was accompanying his uncle, Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry, to a neighboring village, he felt that someone was following him. He looked back and saw a *saṃnyāsī*, renunciant, smiling at him. The *saṃnyāsī* said to Satyanarayana Sarma, "You are worried, aren't you? You will have better opportunities by your nineteenth year and you will carry the Kuchipudi mantle far and wide" (Nagabhushana Sarma 2005: 7). In the documentary film *I Am Satyabhama* (2012), directed by Dulam Satyanarayana, Satyanarayana Sarma speculates that the saint who visited him during his youth may have been Siddhendra himself. By incorporating Siddhendra into his own life history, Satyanarayana Sarma elevates his narrative from personal reflection to performative hagiography.

When he was twenty years old, Satyanarayana Sarma finally received the opportunity to perform the lead female role of the young heroine Uṣā in the *yakṣagāna Uṣā-pariṇayam.* Satyanarayana Sarma's skills were honed by his second and more influential *guru*, Chinta Krishna Murthy, who "groomed Satyam as a heroine of his troupe, polishing the rough edges, which made Satyam more graceful and more lovable" (Nagabhushana Sarma 2005: 10). Satyanarayana Sarma soon gained national fame for his adeptness at impersonation and came to be known as "Uṣā Satyam" within the Kuchipudi village and as "Kali Yuga Satyabhāmā," an incarnation of Satyabhāmā for our age, outside the village.

Hyderabad-based dance scholar Anuradha Jonnalagadda characterizes Satyanarayana Sarma as "perhaps the greatest female impersonator of the present century" (1993: 132), while Jayant Kastuar, the former Secretary of the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi, describes Satyanarayana Sarma as "one of the most outstanding dancers of our time; he has achieved rare eminence in the art of female impersonation."[17] Similarly, Nagabhushana Sarma states, "This exceptional performance skill challenging all the norms of credibility is the main stay of Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma's virtuosity of impersonating women, a virtuosity that beguiles both men and women" (2005: 5–6). In a personal interview, Nagabhushana Sarma relayed to me that he has seen Satyanarayana Sarma perform *Bhāmākalāpam* at least fifty times since his childhood. He reported that during these performances, there was not a single time that he did not cry when Satyanarayana Sarma enacted the *lekha* scene, in which Satyabhāmā writes a poignant letter to Kṛṣṇa begging for his quick return. Nagabhushana Sarma stated:

> Our experiences with Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma were very fine moments in our lives where we wept with him. When he finished his letter, there was no occasion when people did not weep.…And so, I have seen him about fifty times. Fifty! In my younger days we had a craze for going and seeing Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* wherever he performed. And he used to perform in a fifty-mile radius. He used to perform almost once in a week. I studied near Vijayawada, which is hardly twenty-five kilometers to Kuchipudi.

[17] Jayant Kastuar's remarks are found in *Nritya Nidhi Utsav*, "Treasures of Indian Dance" (2005).

> And they used to perform in the villages. And whenever he did the letter, you were lost.[18]

Nagabhushana Sarma's approbation of Satyanarayana Sarma's performance of Satyabhāmā is not unique but is rather reflective of a general tenor of admiration when discussing his particular skills of impersonation. Almost every Kuchipudi practitioner I interviewed regarding the practice of impersonation in Kuchipudi dance invariably named Satyanarayana Sarma as the singular person capable of donning the *strī-vēṣam*. In the eyes of many Kuchipudi performers who witnessed this legendary figure, Satyanarayana Sarma *is* Satyabhāmā.

In addition to moving his audience to tears, Satyanarayana Sarma's other important performative skill is his reported ability to deceive his audiences with respect to his gender identity by "passing" as a woman. It is important to note that unlike the drag performers of *Paris Is Burning*, for whom failures in passing could have violent consequences, passing for Satyanarayana Sarma was a pleasurable, risk-free act, one that elevated his status as a Kuchipudi impersonator. As I have argued elsewhere (Kamath 2019a), impersonation on the Kuchipudi stage and passing in quotidian contexts *reinscribe* hegemonic brahmin masculinity rather than contesting it. In an autobiographical essay entitled "Bhrukunsuvas of Kuchipudi," Satyanarayana Sarma describes in his own words that once, while in the town of Nagpur, he performed the role of the young heroine Uṣā in *Uṣā-pariṇayam*. When he went into the dressing room to change his costume in between scenes, a wealthy landlord entered and began making amorous advances. In order to return to the stage in time for his next scene, Satyanarayana Sarma had to reveal his identity to the landlord. Satyanarayana Sarma describes this moment by stating, "[The landlord] felt embarrassed and returned to his seat after saying that had I really been a lady, he would have bequeathed his entire property to me, but unfortunately I happened to be male" (1996: 86).

As another example, Satyanarayana Sarma relates a story when he was staying in the house of a wealthy landlord in the Duvva village of the east Godavari district. During the performance, the landlord purchased a large garland and then gave it to Satyanarayana Sarma onstage while he was still in costume. The landlord's wife became upset that her husband had garlanded an unknown woman and immediately left the performance. When the landlord reached home, a fight erupted between the couple, and Satyanarayana Sarma describes the events that followed:

> Meanwhile, I removed the make-up and went to see them. Their fight was almost reaching the climax when I explained to her that it was none other than me who played the role of Satyabhama and showed her the garland. She was shocked and went inside the house with an embarrassed look (1996: 87).

Satyanarayana Sarma undoubtedly delighted in these stories of passing as a woman. He told me similar stories when I first met him in the summer of 2006 and again in December 2007. During both of these informal visits, he relayed the story of the rich landlord in his dressing room, as well as an incident when the

[18] Modali Nagabhushana Sarma, interview by author, Hyderabad, October 29, 2009.

screenwriter of the 1967 film *Rahasyam* mistook him for a woman, even though he was dressed in male attire and had been cast to play the role of the male Hindu love god Manmatha.[19] In fact, Satyanarayana Sarma seemed to be most comfortable before his audiences garbed in female attire. In a lecture demonstration at the Sangeet Natak Akademi's *Nrityotsava* festival in 1995, available in the Sangeet Natak Akademi archives, Satyanarayana Sarma jokingly refers to his "bald head" and male attire and indicates to the audience that he might look better in *strī-vēṣam* wearing female clothing with flowers in his hair.[20]

While one can never be certain of the actual circumstances of these oral accounts, Satyanarayana Sarma utilized these incidents of passing to construct his own hagiography as a man who beguiles both women and men. Whether we view these hagiographic accounts as historical or constructed, Satyanarayana Sarma's skills in impersonating female characters such as Satyabhāmā gained him critical acclaim in the national dance scene as well as an authoritative status in the Kuchipudi village. His authority in the Kuchipudi village was a direct result of his skills as an adept impersonator, specifically his gender performance of Satyabhāmā in *Bhāmākalāpam.* Satyanarayana Sarma was the first individual from the village of Kuchipudi to gain national recognition in India: he was the first Kuchipudi recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1961, he was elected into the Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship in 1967, and he was awarded the prestigious national title of Padma Shri in 1970. These national acknowledgments of his enactment of the *strī-vēṣam* contributed to his performative power *onstage*, as the most talented dancer in the performance practices that are the hallmark of the Kuchipudi brahmin tradition, and to his class-based socioeconomic power *offstage*, as the recipient of significant financial wealth from his nationally recognized skills at impersonation.

By excelling in the one factor that is central in the creation of brahmin masculinity in the Kuchipudi village—the donning of Satyabhāmā's *strī-vēṣam*—Satyanarayana Sarma not only received national approbation, but he also lived up to the expectations established in the Kuchipudi village by Siddhendra's hagiography. If one could imagine Siddhendra's ideal student in the contemporary period, it is likely that student would be Satyanarayana Sarma. Satyanarayana Sarma was thus not only the most authoritative brahmin male performer of the Kuchipudi village; he embodied the normative ideal for brahmin male dancers residing within this performance community.

If Satyanarayana Sarma is the normative figure for brahmin male performers in the Kuchipudi village, particularly due to his impersonation of Satyabhāmā, what does this reveal about gender normativity in the Kuchipudi village more broadly? Contrary to mainstream Euro-American contexts, the boundaries of gender normativity within the Kuchipudi village *include*, rather than exclude, gender impersonation: the norm in the Kuchipudi village is to see the brahmin male body performing a woman's guise. In addition, because all brahmin men from the Kuchipudi village are bound by the prescriptive code of enacting Satyabhāmā's guise, the practice of impersonation creates their gender identities both in

[19] Satyanarayana Sarma also repeated these stories in the documentary film *I Am Satyabhama* (2012).

[20] Lecture demonstration by Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, *Kuchipudi* Nrityotsava (1995).

performance and in everyday life. Therefore, a Kuchipudi brahmin male is not really a man until he impersonates a woman. This assertion implies that the effects of impersonation are not limited to the stage but actually spill into the contours of everyday life—a fact that is evident in the case of Satyanarayana Sarma's status both onstage and off. In order for a Kuchipudi brahmin male performer to live up to his normative gender identity offstage, he must impersonate Satyabhāmā onstage. In other words, impersonation constructs, rather than subverts, gender norms in the Kuchipudi village.

Judith Butler and *Bhāmākalāpam*

In proposing her theory of gender trouble, Butler posits the provocative idea that drag performance not only reveals the imitative structure of gender but exhibits the possibility for disrupting gender itself. Drag *allegorizes* the mechanisms of gender production by creating on the surface of the body an illusion of inner depth via gesture, movement, gait, and other "corporeal theatrics" (Butler 2004: 218; 1993b: 317). As discussed earlier, the drag performer does not simply parody a particular gender identity but in fact parodies, and thus destabilizes, the very notion of an original gender. The stylized repetition of acts necessary for gender enactment reveals open moments of time and space that are vulnerable to disruption; repetition is never exact, and it is in the repetition that gender can be subverted. Every new gender performance, therefore, also presents a new possibility for gender subversion.

Contrary to what I expected when meeting Satyanarayana Sarma on his veranda for the first time, Butler's elegant theory of gender trouble has little place in the Kuchipudi village. In a context in which impersonation creates, rather than disrupts, gender norms, the discourses of gender norms must be framed differently. How, then, are we to understand the practice of Kuchipudi impersonation in juxtaposition with American drag performance as theorized by Butler? The distinction between these two performance contexts rests in part on the class/caste and social status of the Kuchipudi impersonator, such as Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, in comparison with the social status of the drag performer, such as Venus Xtravaganza. The Kuchipudi impersonator enjoys dominant-caste status and performs a highly stylized and socially acceptable form of gender impersonation that draws on a long tradition of religious discourse and aesthetics in the Indian context. For Satyanarayana Sarma, impersonation onstage and passing offstage are pleasurable acts, ones that augment his performative and financial status in the village. In stark contrast, the drag performers in Livingston's film *Paris Is Burning* reside at the fringes of New York's urban society and portray nonnormative ideals of gender and sexuality within the more private spaces of underground drag ball performances. Passing in everyday life, while still pleasurable for drag performers, has tragic results if not fully achieved, as evident in the case of Venus Xtravaganza. The Kuchipudi impersonator is thus the antithesis of the American drag ball performer featured in *Paris Is Burning*. One resides at the center, while the other resides at the margins. One enjoys dominant-caste patriarchal privilege, while the other risks

tragic demise. One resignifies, while the other subverts. One *is* the norm, while the other is *outside* the norm.

If it is the norm in the Kuchipudi village to see the brahmin male body donning a woman's guise, then Butler's questions of subversion and resignification must be reframed in light of this reworked notion of normativity. Butler, in her discussions of drag as either subverting or resignifying "hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms," does not sufficiently theorize the nuances of norms and normativity. For Butler, drag performance reinscribes or subverts gender norms, but in the case of the Kuchipudi village, gender norms are predicated upon impersonation, specifically the brahmin male body in a woman's guise. Understanding the contours and limitations of normativity, whether norms of gender, sexuality, caste, class, or race, is important for feminist discourse more broadly. In a review essay on queer theory, Sharon Marcus writes:

> Outside the realm of queer theory, very little current scholarship takes seriously the claims that sexual orientations defined as different actually have much in common, or that the sexualities we consider normal and think we know best are consequently those we understand the least. Most work on sexuality continues to focus on those who deviate from the heterosexual norm —queers, women, and masturbators—and on masculinist society's anxious, phobic responses to deviance. *Straight men in queer theory are straw men*, with the ironic result that male heterosexuality maintains its status as universal, normal, homogenous, predictable, and hence immune from investigation. There could be no more powerful extension of queer theory than detailed research into straight men's desires, fantasies, attractions, and gender identification—research unafraid to probe the differences between sexual ideology and sexual practice (2005: 213; emphasis added).

If straight men are the straw men of queer theory, then brahmin men can also be read as the straw men of the study of gender in the Indian context in that they are often characterized as "normal, homogenous, predictable, and hence immune from investigation." In order to challenge the hegemony of brahmin men in India, we must first analyze the myriad ways in which they both maintain *and* negotiate power through vernacular performances and everyday discourses.

Theorizing brahmin masculinity is crucial for understanding the construction of gender and caste norms within the Kuchipudi village. The class and caste status of brahmin male performers such as Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma set the normative standards for the Kuchipudi community and dictate the ways in which gender and caste can be constructed. Gender impersonation in the Kuchipudi village is thus not gender *trouble*. On the contrary, gender impersonation serves as the means by which the brahmin male gains both performative and socioeconomic power. However, moving beyond the confines of the Kuchipudi village to the transnational stage opens up sites for disruption beyond the brahmin male dancer dressed in a woman's guise (Kamath 2019a).

Postscript

On November 17, 2012, Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma passed away from a lung infection, and his death evoked worldwide mourning in the Kuchipudi community. While Satyanarayana Sarma was an acclaimed Kuchipudi impersonator, he was not readily willing to impart the secret of his skills to the next generation of Kuchipudi dancers, thereby leaving no one to carry forth his legacy. Despite the fact that all Kuchipudi brahmin males are bound by the vow of donning the *strī-vēṣam*, only a select handful are successful at doing so, and even fewer are capable of imparting their skills to future generations. The limited financial resources available to male performers in the Kuchipudi village today have forced younger hereditary performers to move outside the village to pursue better opportunities. In addition, shifting notions of gender and sexuality outside the Kuchipudi village context, along with increased participation of women in Kuchipudi dance, have significantly attenuated the interest in gender impersonation. In the current context, *Bhāmāka-lāpam* performances by hereditary Kuchipudi male dancers function primarily as placeholders of "tradition" rather than as displays of aesthetic and performative skill. The death of Satyanarayana Sarma seems to be the death of impersonation in the Kuchipudi village, and today this performative practice primarily continues through nostalgic memory rather than prescriptive mandate.

Compounding this is the increased visibility of drag in American popular culture. With the reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race* and the FX series *Pose*, the latter of which dramatizes certain elements of *Paris Is Burning*, drag has become increasingly visible for contemporary mainstream American audiences. Embodied practices of reading and throwing shade, once limited to "old school" Black queer vernacular, are now part of the quotidian American lexicon (Johnson 2016: 3; McGlotten 2016: 265). While Venus's death functions as an afterthought to *Paris Is Burning*, the tragic death of a drag performer is dramatized in *Pose* through the character Candy Ferocity, a Black trans woman who is murdered in her hotel room by a client in a July 2019 episode of the show.[21] Almost three decades after *Paris Is Burning*, viewers unwittingly encounter Venus's death through the murder of Candy on the silver screen. Cinematic renderings such as *Paris Is Burning* or *Pose* performatively make visible abject figures like Venus or Candy, although the politics of such transubstantiations are certainly questionable (hooks 1992: 154–55; Butler 1993a: 133).

While Venus Xtravaganza and Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma are indeed antithetical figures, their deaths exemplify the ambivalent possibilities of drag and impersonation, respectively. Despite the fact that one defied the norm and the other constructed the norm, both Venus and Satyanarayana Sarma illustrate the power and constraints of ideals of gender, sexuality, race, caste, and class, or the messy nexus of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991). Exemplifying this ambivalence, I will conclude with the words of Venus herself: "Some of them say that we're sick or crazy, and some of them think that we're the most gorgeous special things on earth."

[21] See *Pose*, Season 2, Episode 4, which first aired on July 9, 2019.

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