

**LEARNING KATHAK:  
CRAFTING BODIES AND SELVES IN THE  
GURU-SHISHYA PARAMPARA**

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## ABSTRACT

Kathak dance is a north Indian dance form that integrates elements of dance, music and drama: rhythmic footwork, recitation, pirouettes, elaborate gestural movements and dramatic storytelling form part of the repertoire. Learning historically occurred within the guru-shishya parampara, the tradition of one-to-one learning between master-disciple. The shifting socio-economic circumstances of today's world make this approach difficult to sustain; universities, academies, commercial and private dance schools are slowly replacing this traditional model, both in India and abroad. The re-making of kathak is further exacerbated by the increasing and ongoing flow of teachers, students, images and ideas as they travel between India and its many diasporic locations. This dissertation is an ethnographic study of one such transnational lineage of dancers, based between India and America, who continue to subscribe to a re-created version of the guru-shishya parampara.

This is an ethnography of learning and apprenticeship in kathak dance. My research is based on two and a half years of fieldwork under the tutelage of Pandit Chitresh Das and the larger community of dancers in Kolkata and the San Francisco Bay area, the two main locations of his lineage. I take the guru-shishya relationship as the grounding for practitioners' experience of the dance, for it is only through study with the guru that one can participate in the lineage's idealised way of life of the kathaka. I address the hierarchical nature of guru-shishya, a relationship based on ideals of surrendering, submission and discipline, with a description of the slow temporality of the process, the productive nature of discipline, and the expanded sense of agency that is the long term goal of such learning relationships.

Place-making has become a salient feature of existence in the Indian diaspora, brought about by the migrations and movements of people between India and America. Through a study of learning kathak, I consider the experiences of place-making and the limits to which entire 'places' can be moved. I consider the importance of the spatial located-ness of practice, and of place as a materialised site of practice, where people move, emote and relate to one another in particular ways. I also consider the potentiality of flows and the transformations of transnationalism, as well as of its limits.

### Statement of Candidate

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled “**Learning Kathak: Crafting Bodies and Selves in the Guru-Shishya Parampara**” has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information source and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

The research presented in this thesis was approved by the Macquarie University Ethics Review Committee, reference number: **HE23Nov2007-D05562** on **December 14, 2007**.

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## **NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION**

I use English transliterations for all Hindi, Bengali and Sanskrit terms within this dissertation. I have relied on the transliterations in written materials published and provided by the dance school and teachers with whom I studied and researched. Many of the transliterations are thus, anglicised versions of the Hindi, Bengali or Sanskrit terms.