Far from Forgotten: Bharatanatyam, cultural infrastructure, and enacting equity in US-based folklife apprenticeship programs

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Abstract: National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)-funded state folklife programs in the United States of America historically aim to "[identify]...arts that are at risk for being forgotten" and "fortify those at-risk art forms" (Malloy and Murphy, 2017, p. 11). Far from being forgotten, Bharatanatyam—classicized Indian dance—is an artistic genre upheld by strong cultural infrastructure and a large body of practitioners, the majority of whom are Hindu Indian Americans (e.g., O'Shea, 2003; Soneji, 2010; Putcha, 2019). The tension between Bharatanatyam's status as classicized, infrastructurally-supported dance form and the NEA's priority to support and sustain artistic practices that belong to minority groups and may be "at-risk" inspires a nuanced examination of the ideologies, institutions, and individuals involved in regularly funding Bharatanatyam folklife apprenticeships across the US. I argue against the notion of uncritically safeguarding minority cultural forms, expanding on Grant and Chhuon's (2016) idea of artistic infrastructure. In this article, I analyze NEA's and UNESCO's intersecting ideologies on folklife and heritage promotion, Bharatanatyam's US-based history and artistic infrastructure as a genre belonging to a racial minority group, and autoethnographic reflections as a former Bharatanatyam apprentice and ethnomusicologist. Through this three-pronged approach, I seek to unveil multilayered and nuanced analyses that grantmaking organizations and individuals must exercise in order to enact their social justice-oriented commitments to equitably supporting artistic genres—especially those belonging to minority groups.

Keywords: *Bharatanatyam, apprenticeships, folk and traditional arts, South Asian performing arts, diaspora*

Introduction

The United States' National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) is a government-funded entity that has historically aimed to support folk and traditional art forms belonging to socioeconomically and racially marginalized minority groups (National Endowment for the Arts, 2019). Since the mid-1970s, the NEA has funded state-based apprenticeship programs for traditional and folk arts. While the NEA does not exclusively support "at-risk" cultural forms (Malloy and Murphy, 2017, p. 11), creating systemic supports for artistic practices belonging to communities such as laborers, rural

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Americans, and racial minority groups has historically been at the heart of government-supported folk and traditional arts programs in the US.

In this essay, I analyze US state apprenticeship programs' funding of a particular dance genre practiced primarily by Indian-American communities: Bharatanatyam. Drawing on my experiences as an ethnomusicologist, former Texas Folklife Apprentice for Bharatanatyam and Texas Folklife Apprenticeship Program panelist, and US-born and -trained Bharatanatyam dancer from 2005 onwards, I contend that nuanced, critical understanding of artistic genres is necessary to make equitable funding decisions. Bharatanatyam is a particularly effective case study that illustrates complex and multilayered factors that funders must consider when assessing the vitality and vulnerability of minority communities' cultural forms (Grant, 2012).

While Bharatanatyam is a classicized dance genre practiced by a racial and ethnic minority group in the US, it also currently benefits from a strong cultural infrastructure rooted in flourishing Hindu American cultural networks across the US and India, especially from the 1990s onwards. Further, Bharatanatyam apprenticeships are funded quite often by NEA-funded state folk arts councils from Idaho to Alabama, California to Maryland. How can the case study of Bharatanatyam folklife funding and cultural infrastructure in the US provide insights into social justice-oriented traditional arts grant-making in national and international contexts? Through this case study, I suggest some key factors that local and national grant-making organizations and evaluators must consider in order to make more critically-informed and equitable funding decisions in folk and traditional arts apprenticeships. I also examine how histories and discourses of cultural endangerment and preservation shape state apprenticeship programs' decisions to fund minority art forms today, and how practitioners engage with these discourses to secure funding. To tackle these questions, I analyze governmental and historical sources, scholarship on cultural preservation and traditional arts, and autoethnographic experiences as an Indian-American Bharatanatyam dancer and ethnomusicologist.

First, I present a history of NEA-funded state apprenticeship programs in the US. I draw on white papers and reports on the National Endowment for the Arts and folklife apprenticeship programs to outline ideological motivations behind NEA's promotion of traditional and folk arts amongst geographically, socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically marginalized groups in the United States from the 1970s onwards.

Next, I present the case study of state folklife apprenticeship funding of Bharatanatyam, a form of classicized Indian dance, in the US. As an Indian-American Bharatanatyam dancer, I interrogate how a strong, global cultural infrastructure in the US and India sustains this genre. Following Catherine Grant's and Sarin Chhuon's idea that an artistic form's infrastructure is a key indicator of its vitality or viability (Grant and Chhuon, 2016, p. 32), I argue that Bharatanatyam in the US benefits from strong cultural, economic, geophysical, and digital infrastructures. Hence, its uncritical funding due to its belonging to a minority racial and ethnic group within the US presents an incomplete picture of Bharatanatyam's well-supported infrastructural status as a traditional art form. This analysis is centered on my autoethnographic reflections as a former Texas Folklife Bharatanatyam apprentice from February-August 2021 and recent former apprenticeship committee panelist.

Finally, I suggest that the implications of this study reach beyond Bharatanatyam and US folklife contexts. Understanding the development of folklife programs in the US as connected to broader international processes reveals important lessons and pitfalls for equitably funding folk and traditional arts across contexts. These are matters of social justice, in that they relate to the fair distribution of institutional funds and resources for cultural programs. Thus, it is crucial to cultivate

nuanced understandings of different art forms' socioeconomic, historic, and political contexts and how practitioners position themselves in relation to these issues. I argue that these insights are vital for stakeholders to make funding decisions that bolster social justice in the arts. I take UNESCO's heritage work as a comparative case to understand the effects of safeguarding and preservation discourses and policies (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004, p. 53). Building on scholarship from the fields of critical heritage studies and ethnomusicology (Titon, 2009; Grant, 2012; Beardslee, 2016; Grant and Chhuon, 2016; Stefano, 2016), I suggest that considering cultural infrastructure within the specific, local, temporal contexts of an artistic genre is integral to gauging the "vitality" of—and hence differing needs for "safeguarding"—minority groups' cultural forms (Grant, 2012).

The NEA, state folklife councils, and folk and traditional arts apprenticeships

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) is an independent agency of the US Government, founded by the US Congress' National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965 (National Endowment for the Arts, 2019, p. 1). Following the NEA's establishment, "public folklore" and folklife programs "gain[ed] significant footing in the late 1960s when awareness of the importance of vernacular cultural practices and expressions was raised at the [US] national level" (Stefano 2016, p. 585). In 1965, the first five state folklife programs were established to "engage the nation's rural, mountain, occupational groups, inner-city, working-class, and immigrant communities" across the US (National Endowment for the Arts, 2017, p. 1). Stefano explains how "a nationwide infra-structure of state-level folklife programs was established during the mid-1970s as a result of funding from the newly formed Folk and Traditional Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)" (Stefano, 2016, p. 585). NEA-supported state folklife councils multiplied, with 38 of 50 American states having their own councils in the mid-1990s (Auerbach and For, 1996). This brief chronology of state folklife councils demonstrates their crucial function in connecting national funding sources and artistic priorities to local communities and their cultural forms. Within this infrastructure of state folklife councils, folk and traditional arts apprenticeship programs are my specific point of focus. In 1983, state folklife councils began to administer apprenticeship programs that promoted cultures and art forms within their own regions by funding teams of expert practitioners and apprentices (Malloy and Murphy, 2017, p. 6).

The NEA broadly defines folk and traditional arts as arts "rooted in and reflective of the cultural life of a community" (National Endowment for the Arts, 2017, p. 1). Digging more deeply into literature on NEA folklife apprenticeships provides meaningful insights into the specific aspects of folk and traditional arts that the NEA has historically aimed to support through its grantmaking. In a 2017 overview and analysis of the efficacy of NEA folk and traditional arts funding, NEA grantees (i.e., US-wide state folklife councils) prioritized two goals: 1) to identify "traditional, occupational, and folk arts that are at risk for being forgotten"; and 2) to "fortify those at-risk art forms" (Malloy and Murphy, 2017, p. 11). While cultural preservation may not be the NEA's and state folklife organizations' exclusive goal, "immigrant populations, general underserved, tribal/native communities, rural communities, refugees, Pacific Islander and Asian populations, African-American community, Latino community, and aging populations" (Malloy and Murphy, 2017, p. 19) are noted as being communities whose traditions are vital to support. For example, regional folklife traditions that NEA researchers and folklife panelists have discussed and funded include Native American saddle making and basket weaving, Hawaiian chanting, Bluegrass fiddle music, African American quilt making, and Zydeco dance. These examples offer

glimpses into the different ethnic and cultural communities that apprenticeship programs locally support.

NEA Folk and Traditional Arts funding is a significant—but not exclusive—source of support for American folklife and apprenticeship programs. Cultural communities independent of state folklife councils also offer apprenticeship opportunities, as do university institutes and programs stemming from the US's National Endowment for the Humanities. Thus, this article focuses on only one part of a complex patchwork of overlapping and discrete institutions, funding sources, and infrastructures that support US-wide apprenticeships in folk and traditional arts.

Folklife apprenticeships are highly popular and successful programs in the eyes of many artists and institutional stakeholders. Funding for apprenticeships is modest, and generally does not exceed $5,000 (USD) per apprentice-mentor team for apprenticeship periods of 6-12 months. Despite, or perhaps due to, their modest budgets, "apprenticeship programs are one of the clear success stories in the field of folk arts" in their ability to "promise—and deliver—so much for so little" (Auerbach and For, 1996, p. 31). Indeed, an analysis of most common activities undertaken by NEA-supported state folklife councils, apprenticeships programs were the third most popular activity, following fieldwork/research and exhibits/demonstrations (Malloy and Murphy, 2017, pp. 23-24). The fact that a significant portion of folk and traditional arts funding is used to support apprenticeship programs illustrates the role of the US' public folklife systems in supporting local communities' cultural practices.

Since their conception, apprenticeship programs have financially supported qualified and serious students of a particular traditional cultural form to undertake advanced training under a master or mentor artist in that field. Speaking from experience as a state folklife apprentice and program committee member, both the apprentice's and mentor's artistic training, rapport, and embeddedness in the community and culture of their art form is essential to being selected. For example, my Bharatanatyam apprenticeship supported seven months of intensive training in choreography with my *guru,* or dance teacher, of nine years. Throughout this time, I took one-on-one lessons with him that centered on choreography development and refinement. I also participated in musical recording activities and *solkattu* (rhythmic recitation and mastery) training that is an essential part of teaching and professionally practicing Bharatanatyam. My apprenticeship culminated in a showcase where I presented original choreographies and background information about Bharatanatyam to a public audience.

As a second-generation Hindu-Indian American dancer as well as an ethnomusicologist specializing in South Asian performing arts, my dancing Bharatanatyam in diasporic and global settings continuously raises ethical issues that make me re-examine my relationship to the genre. Throughout my classical training, understanding the power dynamics of performing in Hindu, upper-caste spaces that do not acknowledge Bharatanatyam's histories of erasure is a deeply troubling aspect of artistic practice that I constantly wrestle with and seek to address in my own work. Over the years, I have sought to use my Bharatanatyam performance first and foremost as an arts educator to contextualize South Asian and Hindu religious and literary traditions in educational settings and amongst non-traditional audiences in the US. In performances, I seek to present Bharatanatyam's history of appropriation (described further below) and the provenance of items that I perform (e.g., language, poet, region/historical era, choreographer) so as to demonstrate the complex histories that different pieces embody. In my experience, this act of historically contextualizing and explaining the provenances of my performances is most often actively resisted in Hindu religious settings, where institutions seek to erase the multilayered and problematic histories of classicized Indian arts. I saw in the folklife apprenticeship a rare

opportunity to choreograph new items that stemmed from anti-caste, regional, and contemporary South Asian literary and philosophical traditions from outside Hindu American networks of artistic patronage.

Infrastructures of American Bharatanatyam

Bharatanatyam is a major dance form that upper caste Hindu reformers and artists codified in the early 20th century by appropriating matrilineal, localized performance traditions from across the present-day Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka. Practitioners of Bharatanatyam today refer to two intertwined strands of artistic practice within the form: that of *nritta,* or 'pure dance,' and *abhinaya,* or expressive storytelling. I have heard these divisions repeated and reiterated throughout my many years of training as a Bharatanatyam in the US, with visiting artists from India, and in India as well. Following its reform and codification in the early 1900s, Bharatanatyam repertoire has revolved around Hindu religious poetry and themes, especially drawing on the work of the Carnatic Hindu musicians and poets. As Vasudha Narayanan claims, "to know Bharata Natyam is to learn the social structures of the Hindu traditions" with their "received traditions of power structures" and to then "enter into [their] affective ethos" via gendered and classed body languages and re-enactment of stories (Narayanan 2003, p. 502). Thus, dancing Bharatanatyam is a form of "participating in power structures, whether they are perceived as spiritual, social, aesthetic, or ethnic"—and perpetuating these power structures and Hindu normative notions of gender, class, social organization, and beliefs in diasporic settings (Narayanan, 2003, p. 503).

Analyses from sociological (Kurien, 2007), anthropological (Srinivasan, 2012; Putcha, 2020), religious studies (Fuller and Narasimhan, 2014), and autoethnographic perspectives illustrate how Bharatanatyam's cultural, economic, and digital infrastructures are deeply rooted in Indian- and Hindu-American diasporic culture. Bharatanatyam's exponential growth has been catalyzed by a "third wave" of Indian immigration to the US from the early 1990s onwards, which is overwhelmingly "upper-caste, with Brahmins [being] particularly overrepresented" (Kurien, 2007, p. 45). This wave of Indian immigrants has, from then till now, maintained "consistently higher median household incomes than white Americans" (Kurien, 2007, p. 45). That many former US state folklife apprenticeship teams for Bharatanatyam portrayed the dance as a sacred and ancient Hindu art form despite its undeniably modern codification and aesthetics illustrates the "[growing] Hindu nationalist sentiment" that "is directly connected to more recent waves of migration of Brahmin professionals whose IT sector-based [background]…correlates with the creation of Hindu religious-cultural organizations and sites (Kurien, 2007, p. 81).

Funded by Hindu-Indian immigrants, American Hindu temples serve as integral parts of Indian classical art infrastructure today, alongside powerful, religiously and politically charged virtual platforms. In my own training as a Bharatanatyam dancer, Hindu temples were one of the first performance sites and are an enduring hub of dance promotion—even in remote cities with temples in strip malls or only a handful of dancers. As hubs of cultural and religious performance, Hindu temples provide platforms to showcase dance training, primarily by Hindu women and girls. Bharatanatyam and other Indian classical arts classes are often offered through *bala vihar* children's spiritual education programs and promotion of young artistes in temple-sponsored concerts.

In addition to temples, there are now innumerable Indian classical arts societies and dance schools throughout the US where Bharatanatyam workshops, residencies by top dancers from India, competitions and festivals are held annually. While Bharatanatyam is a minority dance genre

in the US, the global infrastructures and resources available for diasporic dancers to hone and develop their art are abundant. Critical dance studies scholars have delved into the shifting position of Bharatanatyam as an increasingly global genre (O'Shea 2003, pp. 177, 182)—though with strong, often insidious and invisible ties to Hindu nationalist political agendas that perpetuate dominant-caste Hindu culture in diasporic settings (Srinivasan 2011, p. 129). In her article on Bharatanatyam in transnational contexts, Janet O'Shea offers a nuanced analysis of the genre's "20th-century history of recontextualization and its long-standing international circulation" that "both responds to and obscures [Bharatanatyam's] participation in a global culture market" (2003, p. 177). She goes on to argue that Bharatanatyam "appears internationally both as an emblem of national and diasporic identity and as a 'high art' that transcends national and linguistic boundaries" (O'Shea, 2003, p. 177). Avanthi Meduri names Bharatanatyam as a "global dance" that "manifests itself as a world form today, quite like Ballet, albeit with a different genealogy" (2004, p. 11).

Indeed, the National YoungArts Foundation, which annually conducts national competitions and names top young artists in the country, accepts applications from selected dance forms that are practiced widely in the US (YoungArts, 2021. These genres include ballet, contemporary, hip hop, jazz, tap, choreography, and a few "world dance forms" among which Bharatanatyam and other Indian classical dance forms are included. That a major arts program recognizes and is able to set standardized judging criteria for Bharatanatyam and Indian classical dance styles—especially when dances from other cultures are not readily accepted—speaks to the privileged position that Indian classical dance forms hold in mainstream American performance cultures. US-wide competitions such as the annual Cleveland Thyagaraja festival (Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival, n.d.) that fund its winners to perform in Chennai, India—the cultural hub of contemporary Bharatanatyam in India—point to the well-supported, globally-connected position of Bharatanatyam in the US.

Turning to the virtual world, there is proof of a vibrant digital infrastructure to promote Bharatanatyam and other Indian classical arts in and beyond the US. For example, IndianRaga is a successful Indian classical arts organization that promotes art forms including Bharatanatyam through online and social media platforms, forging a vibrant and accessible digital infrastructure for Indian arts in the diaspora. Tailoring performances to suit new aesthetics of online, condensed consumption, organizations such as IndianRaga, as well as popular Bharatanatyam artists, participate in ongoing transnational cultural exchanges by dancing shorter duration pieces (2-5 minutes long, as opposed to traditional pieces that can range up to 30-40 minutes)[2]. Founded by Indian American immigrants and catering to Indian American and Hindu audiences, IndianRaga now offers online trainings and certifications, the chance to book live performances, applications to residency programs, and monthly thematic competitions across different genres of Indian performing arts. The proliferation and continuing success of Indian classical arts online speaks to the strength of its digital infrastructures.

Not only are global institutional affiliations for Bharatanatyam strong, but the material connections and performers' access to customized costumes and jewelry from India sustain performance culture in the United States. Priya Srinivasan prompts consumers and practitioners of this dance to unmask the ubiquitous and obscured cultural and material exchanges between India

[2] Notably, Carnatic vocalist and social activist T.M. Krishna has pioneered an initiative called "Not Limited by Time: A Participatory Arts Initiative" specifically to combat this problem of shortening performance times and attention spans. The YouTube series, which launched in October 2021, features performances by experienced artistes across Indian artistic genres of a longer duration, typically around 30 minutes.

and the US by recognizing "all the objects and discourses that [constitute the] Bharata Natyam dancing body, including the jewels, bells, sari, and the various histories of transnational labor…[as] performing" whenever Indian American dancers perform (Srinivasan, 2011, pp. 162-163). So, even for the majority of American Bharatanatyam dancers who will never win a competition or dance in Chennai, their ability to participate in routine dance classes and performances requires steady access to socioeconomic resources and performs their material and embodied belonging to a global infrastructure of Indian classical art practice.

Post-colonial studies of caste in diasporas (Fuller and Narasimhan, 2014; Adur and Narayanan, 2014; Mosse, 2020) shed light on how subcommunities belonging to the same racial or ethnic group can have very different socioeconomic and political positioning and levels of privilege. Shweta Majumdar Adur and Anjana Narayan critique the portrayal of diasporas "as a homogeneous whole" while ignoring "the role of caste in the diaspora even though caste has been a central unit of analysis" in studies of India and South Asia (2019, p. 245). For South Asian Americans, the issue of dominant culture within immigrant groups and access to infrastructure and resources is enmeshed with diasporic caste hierarchies as well. Dance scholars (Soneji, 2010; Putcha, 2019, 2020) have discussed at length how classical Indian arts (e.g., Bharatanatyam, Carnatic music, Kuchipudi) have been appropriated by upper-caste Brahmin practitioners and replicate caste-based hierarchies through interpenetrating networks of classical Indian artistic and Hindu religious practices. Caste is a relevant point of consideration because, as religious studies scholar David Mosse claims through his study of Brahmin cultural dominance in the British Indian diaspora, "caste [in the diaspora] is vital to family status, marriage, community leadership, temple organization, voluntary organizations, and business and other networks" (2020, p. 21). An important part of performing Brahmin women's upper caste identities is, as Rumya Putcha contends, the practice of Indian classical dances such as Bharatanatyam (2020, pp. 54-56).

Thus, typical Bharatanatyam practice in the US works in parallel to Mosse's description of British-Indian youth's creation of "dominant-caste culture" in the UK through music and cultural participation (2020, p. 13). When contextualized in this way, it is evident that American Bharatanatyam practitioners today benefit from access to an increasingly strong global infrastructure for Bharatanatyam that is intimately intertwined with Hindu nationalist cultural production across continents and through the virtual world. Critics may contend that diasporic Bharatanatyam dancers belong to different caste groups and not only upper-caste Hindu communities. However, scholarship on critical dance studies, combined with research on caste in the diaspora and the diasporic histories of classicized Indian art forms, point to a majority of practitioners' privileged socioeconomic standing. In my experience of dancing in American Bharatanatyam settings for the past fifteen years, the vast majority of dancers hail from upper-caste (e.g., Brahmin) and Hindu backgrounds, or else from socioeconomically mobile ones. The percentage of non-Indian, non-Hindu, and lower caste dancers is, in my experience and research, not significant enough to warrant a questioning of the claim that most Bharatanatyam practitioners hold privileged status in diasporic settings.

These lessons from critically dissecting American Bharatanatyam will, I hope, be applied by funders to better understand how different minority groups and their cultural forms are politically and socioeconomically positioned, and the ways in which practitioners are aware of and address these inequities in status and access to resources in their apprenticeships.

Discussion: Considering infrastructure for equitable funding

One crucial factor that can help determine which art forms and their practitioners are most in need of financial support—and hence a factor that should influence grantmaking decisions—is accessibility of infrastructure and resources, as Catherine Grant and Sarin Chhuon discuss (2016). Artistic infrastructure and resources that are "needed for learning, teaching, and performing" Bharatanatyam include spaces for teaching and performing, clothing and costumes, financial resources for dance lessons and wardrobes, and expendable time for travel (Grant and Chhuon, 2016, p. 36). Bharatanatyam belongs to the minority racial and ethnic group of Hindu and Indian Americans in the US, and hence practitioners are often awarded apprenticeship grants across the US. A simple online search for "US Bharatanatyam apprenticeships" draws up dozens of results for state folklife apprenticeship awardees over the past two decades. Studying the ways in which practitioners of a classicized, globalized genre such as Bharatanatyam possess or lack access to infrastructure and resources provides a more comprehensive picture of the "vitality" and "viability" of a genre, and hence to its need for funding (Grant and Chhuon, 2016). While not all Bharatanatyam apprenticeship teams seek to perpetuate canonical forms of the genre, it is important to consider different practitioners' access to these supports in their artistic journeys when making funding decisions. Also, while I discuss Bharatanatyam, other classical Indian arts, such as Carnatic music and dance forms, benefit from parallel and overlapping infrastructures and resources. Thus, examining infrastructures of an artistic genre can provide unexpected and crucial insights into which minority cultural forms can most benefit from apprenticeship support.

Grasping the implications of artistic infrastructure can help grant evaluators and makers understand how cultural funding can limit or uncritically proliferate the life of a genre. In his critique of UNESCO's ICH scheme, Jeff Todd Titon suggests that considering the "ecological principle [of] limits to growth" is essential to creating sustainable cultural futures for different genres (2009, p. 123). Titon's approach to cultural heritage management stems from an examination of ecological preservation and ideas of stewardship and sustainability. He argues that applying these principles can help institutions such as UNESCO pay attention to grassroots issues rather than imposing top-down schemes that inequitably support cultural forms without paying heed to their implications for local cultural landscapes. Titon's ecologically-minded approach also implies that cultural ecologies are dynamic, living systems that are constantly changing—and hence require constant re-examination and study.

In terms of Bharatanatyam's cultural ecology in the US, the majority of dancers and teachers in the US hail from upper-caste Hindu Indian backgrounds, as I have witnessed firsthand for many years as a dancer. The US Census Bureau categorizes Asian American communities as hailing from over 60 different countries, from Azerbaijan to Vietnam (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.; see also White, 2015, p. 1). The groups encompassed within this category are broad, and vary widely in terms of demographic characteristics. Studies conducted by the Pew Research Center show how data that averages information from across all different Asian groups often obscures inequalities between groups of Asian origin. For example, median household income for Asian Americans in the US was $85,800 in 2019. However, closer examination reveals a large gap between Indian Americans, who have the highest median household income of all Asian American groups at $119,000 USD per year, and Burmese Americans with the lowest median income of $44,000—less than 40% of the Indian subgroups median amount (Budiman and Ruiz, 2021).

Similar disparities exist in other domains, from proficiency in English to education and poverty rates amongst different Asian groups. For example, within South Asian groups, 43% of Bangladeshi Americans self-reported as being Limited English Proficient (LEP) as opposed to

only 22% of Indian Americans (Asian Pacific Institute on Gender Based Violence*,* 2017). Thinking back to Beardslee's comments on how gaining funding and support for heritage and folklife projects requires metacultural production skills such as grant- and prose-writing in English, it is evident that vast differences in factors such as language proficiency and expendable income amongst Asian American and other minority subgroups can determine their success when it comes to seeking out and securing apprenticeship grant funding. These examples demonstrate the need to understand Asian American experiences in the US—and within each state more specifically—through a nuanced, intersectional analysis of applicants' ethnic community and their positioning within it while evaluating and awarding grants.

Reflections on safeguarding in NEA's Folklife system and beyond

As discussed above, state folklife apprenticeship programs are vibrant parts of American cultural life, and serve deeper purposes than to simply revive or sustain "at risk" art forms. However, NEA and state folklife panelists' rhetoric convey a strong desire to identify and bolster at-risk art forms in their geographic regions (e.g., Auerbach and For, 1996; Malloy and Murphy, 2017). These analyses strongly mirror the rhetoric of sustainability and endangerment that drives heritage preservation programs in other parts of the world. UNESCO's heritage preservation schemes can serve as a useful point of comparison to understand how US-based and international approaches to promoting regional cultural forms intersect and diverge (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004, p. 58; Stefano, 2016, p. 585). In the US, for example, ethnographic approaches to cultural preservation and management have been formative for folklife programs. Early US-based folklorists' (e.g., the Seeger and Lomax families) ethnographic approaches to, and successes with, recording and revitalizing regional music traditions in the US influenced ways in which UNESCO built its Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) program to address local community-based issues around the world. The political power that ICH designations and designating bodies wield is evidenced by cultural clashes and even violence between cultural groups who claim certain ICH forms as exclusively their own (e.g., the 2009 'Pendet' controversy and riots over shared Indonesian and Malaysian heritage, described by Chong, 2012).

Historically speaking, both the NEA's folk and traditional arts and UNESCO's heritage support programs began in the post-World War II era as responses to increasing concern over the loss of regional and vernacular cultures and cultural forms, though inspired by a cultural paternalism that motivated these Western institutions to "safeguard" the practices of minority communities and non-Western cultures. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that, while the UNESCO ICH convention officially established ICH programs in 2003, "UNESCO's efforts to establish an instrument for the proception of what it now calls intangible heritage dates from 1952" (2004, p. 53). While safeguarding efforts historically betray a neo-colonial attitude that has driven impetuses by Western institutions to preserve marginalized cultures, it is critical to note that these international exchanges and influences on schemes are increasingly multilateral, and have complex, international consequences for institutions and communities. The language surrounding folk and traditional arts practitioners in the US certainly connects to, and draws upon, the idea of safeguarding. Thus, analyzing the language of safeguarding projects is essential to unpacking the complexities and ethics of funding cultural heritage projects, of which I consider folklife apprenticeships a part. Following Kirschenblatt-Gimblett's description of heritage-folklife projects as "metacultural production," Thomas Beardslee claims that "this meta-cultural production…requires a certain set of skills and access," including "being literate and possessing

the ability to write the correct sort of prose" used in "applications for funding" (Beardslee, 2016, p. 93).

Beardslee's argument suggests that the people who are able to successfully navigate and position themselves within the rhetoric of safeguarding are more successful at gaining funding and support from heritage-promoting institutions. In my time as an apprenticeship program committee member, I have noted this phenomenon and its powerful effects. The practitioners and applicants who understand the language and concerns of grantmaking are able to write grants that evoke rhetoric of cultural vulnerability. This is particularly problematic because there are many worthy applicants who simply do not possess the specialized knowledge of grant-writing rhetoric to succeed in this realm, and hence are considered as less viable applicants.

In the case of Bharatanatyam, I have observed how many folklife apprenticeship grant recipients from this genre draw upon archaizing rhetoric to prove the culture-bearer status of their teachers and a pressing need to carry on the dance form. For example, Bharatanatyam apprenticeship awardees in the past decade have often described (in public forums) the form as "the oldest form of Indian classical dance"[3], or as "an ancient classical dance form"[4] that "has been passed down over many centuries"[5]. Over my 15+ years of learning, performing, and watching Bharatanatyam in the US, I have heard countless practitioners describe Bharatanatyam as an ancient dance form. Practitioners trace the dance genre's origins back to the *Natyashastra,* a text dated "in the early centuries CE" (Pollock, 2016, p. 7). Important elements of Bharatanatyam practice, such as postures, hand and facial gestures, character types, and aesthetics do indeed stem from this seminal treatise. However, Bharatanatyam's history of classicization and codification is undeniably modern, led by waves of middle- and upper-class reformers and practitioners who, along with British colonial policies that criminalized and stigmatized dance and women dancers, co-opted and erased hereditary matrilineal dancers in India from the late 1800s onwards (Soneji, 2010; Putcha, 2020).

When funding art forms that are more often funded, or whose practitioners typically belong to more established demographic groups, it is important to consider the ways in which specific artists position their work within a genre. How is the opportunity of a folklife apprenticeship specifically meaningful in shaping their work outside of traditional spaces and structures of their cultural form? When applying for and working on my Bharatanatyam apprenticeship, I described the genre as a modern invention that is archaized and historicized for political reasons. I then located myself within this tradition as seeking to develop choreographies that drew on non-canonical themes, contemporary and folk poetry that is typically not explored, and to focus on choreographing and conceptualizing music composition for new items. Along with my Bharatanatyam guru of nine years, Dr. Sreedhara Akkihebbalu, we worked with poems that centered critiques of orthodox Brahmanic Hindu rituals, celebrated regional religious practices, and featured a contemporary female poet's work centered on disability. As a performer, arts educator, and public scholar, I sought to locate my work in public-facing contexts that push back against canonical repertoire and whose choreographies address issues related to social justice, such as discrimination against minority and marginalized groups. While my guru also typically teaches more traditional repertoire, the apprenticeship space forged a new dynamic where I sought to do much more independent artistic work to bring my own style and thoughts to the fore. As someone

[3] https://www.humanities.org/blog/announcing-the-2021-2022-heritage-arts-apprenticeship-pairs/
[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=epune2bd0Gc
[5] https://www.arts.wa.gov/2020/08/04/artswa-and-humanities-wa-announce-the-2020-21-heritage-arts-apprentice-pairs/

who primarily practices an Indian classicized art form within non-traditional spaces, the apprenticeship also provided me a space distinct from typical dance class settings to take my artistic work in new directions.

While reading grant applications recently as part of Texas' apprenticeship program committee, I observed that the terminology and logics through which applicants from different minority groups hearkened to ancient histories or appealed to safeguard their cultural heritage presented many complexities. Firstly, it was important to note the different minority communities represented in the applicant pool. As a grant reviewer, I was surprised by the overrepresentation of certain racial and ethnic minority groups and complete lack of others—however it was also illuminating to pay attention to the significant contrasts in proficiency of writing prose for grants, self-representation, and engagement with safeguarding rhetoric. Applicants' proficiency in articulating institutionally-desired narratives of artistic traditions is shaped by intersectional systemic factors such as English proficiency, experience writing grants, time, connections, resources, and capacity to seek support from those familiar with grant writing (or even with hiring a grant writer), and believing that their artistic work is worthy of being funded by agencies such as state folklife councils. Those of us who serve on grantmaking committees must read the applications that are submitted. However, we must also keenly observe which communities and art forms are underrepresented amongst our applicant pools and seek to expand outreach efforts to these groups. Analyzing grant applications with these factors at the fore can facilitate more equitable grantmaking for folk and traditional arts in US-based state folklife apprenticeships and beyond.

Former grantees like myself can meaningfully contribute to broadening access to apprenticeship opportunities by seeking out artists in and beyond their communities who may not consider their art as worthy of funding and may be intimidated by the prospect of applying due to wariness of institutions, English or grant writing barriers, or other reasons. Having benefitted from these experiences, it behooves grantees who possess the resources to do so to encourage and welcome previously unfunded cultural forms and community groups into the apprenticeship program. This process of building and maintaining communities of practitioners across different genres can help foster a sense of belonging through enacting equity, even if initially on a small scale.

Cultivating and enacting equitably through intersectional analysis

In this paper, I have discussed ways in which notions and missions of safeguarding and promoting minority groups' heritage and cultural practices shape the NEA's apprenticeship funding. This work has led to what I consider to be a trend of funding Bharatanatyam and other Indian classical arts apprenticeships without necessarily considering the implications of promoting an already well-supported genre that belongs to a minority community. Because a desire to equitably support marginalized communities' cultural practices has historically driven NEA-funded apprenticeships, the case study of Bharatanatyam demonstrates how a surface-level analysis might overly privilege practitioners who already leverage significant cultural networks to further their art forms. I have drawn on autoethnographic experiences as a Bharatanatyam dancer, former folklife apprentice, and apprenticeship program committee member to suggest how best to apply these insights to grant-making in ways that more equitably allocate folklife apprenticeship resources amongst state folklife apprenticeship applicants from minority communities.

Firstly, as NEA apprenticeship guidelines claim, it is important to remember how critical it is to conduct "outreach based on fieldwork and personal contact" to forge connections with

communities within each state whose cultural practices do not typically receive funding or make it into the applicant pool (Auerbach and For, 1996, p. 26). From firsthand experience working with apprenticeship program directors from different states, it is clear that the underpaid work of apprenticeship directors and state folklife council staff makes this work very difficult. The time, resources, and funding required to conduct in-depth, in-person community outreach especially across large states requires increased pay and training for the staff members who would conduct this work. Given the multiple roles and projects that state folklife staff work on simultaneously, making time and budgets for fieldwork trips of this sort would be a complicated but integral first step to creating more nuanced maps of states' folk and traditional arts landscapes through ethnographic research.

Secondly, apprenticeship grant evaluators would also need to increase their awareness of how infrastructure and access to resources that certain applicants possess affects their grant-writing skills and the appeal of their projects. While evaluators must read those grants that are submitted to them, it is important to bear in mind the socioeconomic, linguistic, and intersectional factors that encourage or discourage certain demographic groups to apply for funding. Assessing an application favorably simply because it belongs to a minority group within a given area, or mentally writing off an application due to its author's limited proficiency in grant-writing or English prose are surefire ways of inequitable grant-making. If a particular art form is being funded consistently and repeatedly in a region or state, it is worthwhile considering what other cultural forms belonging to that community (or other communities) are not showing up in applications, and the possible reasons. In my experience, I also found it important to consider which applicants and their families had resources such as expendable time and income to advance an application in an art form. While apprenticeship grants should not be awarded on a socioeconomic basis alone, it does seem crucially important to critically reflect on ways in which folklife apprenticeships and other competitively awarded cultural schemes might unintentionally be deepening inequities that already exist between applicants of different backgrounds, with implications for both social justice and the sustainability of certain arts practices.

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