



# Becoming-with risk in Autoethnographic Creative Practice

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## Abstract

This paper will explore becoming-with risk in autoethnographic creative practice through a South Asian and posthuman lens. This research is a component of my doctoral research which seeks to engage with ritualistic methodologies as a tool for South Asian choreographic practice.

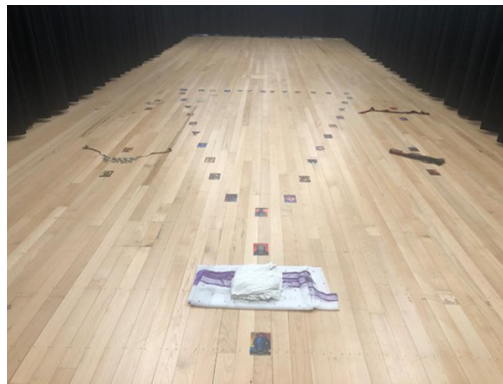
**Keywords:** creative practice, dance, choreography, ritual, risk, South Asian

This article draws on my doctoral research titled: *Mukti Vidhi* which explores ritual, Vedic philosophies, and risk as a method for autoethnographic choreographic practice. *Mukti Vidhi* engages with risk zones by holding intimate work-in-progress sharings, exploring acts of transgression, and framing this practice on six parts of my researcher identity: Brahmin, queer, woman, researcher, ritualist, and performer. These six parts of my identity unraveled each of their own multitude of complexities, amplifying an intersectional identity and need for a critically reflective practice. Risk arrived into this research through each of these identities as their histories, memories, and intergenerational stories unraveled.

Risk became an intuitive pull, and I became aware of the weight risk carried. As Alice O' Grady (2017) states, "in taking risks, individuals and groups put their lives and livelihoods on the line either through choice, necessity, or compulsion" (p. 1). The risks in *Mukti Vidhi* have occurred

through deep consideration and have been explored for their symbolic meaning, their ability to alter my emotions or bodily sensations, and to move toward a new *becoming* (Braidotti, 2013). Perhaps, through this lens, risk is both a choice and a necessity in *Mukti Vidhi*. Exploring personal stories, emotions, and histories could drive a performer back into pain and suffering through re-staging, re-oppressing, and re-traumatizing the body (Baim, 2017) when choreographing these concepts in performance work. Questions around risk arose and led me to resonate with feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2017) and her words around feminist consciousness. She comments, “no wonder feminist work is often about timing: sometimes we are too fragile to do this work; we cannot risk being shattered because we are not ready to put ourselves back together again” (p. 27). Ahmed’s (2017) words led me to question, can I risk being shattered? Can I put myself together again? With these ideas in mind, the driving inquiry for this paper is: how might ritual as a choreographic tool instigate a *becoming-with risk* in autoethnographic research?

*June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2021: our first encounter*



*Figure 1: Our first encounter, Mukti Vidhi, 2021, Waipapa Taumata Rau/ University of Auckland.*

*I have my first creative practice showing with my supervisor today and I am utterly petrified. It's my first time making a full-length solo work and I've got ideas to share but, they could also go terribly wrong. I pull out my tarot cards from my bag which have images of Kali Maa on*

*them before closing all the curtains in the studio. I then tentatively pull out two objects out of my bag, a flogger and a bar gag. Carrying these objects in my hands, I walk around the space to listen to where my intuition guides me to place them. As I place them on the floor to the left of the studio, I can feel my breakfast curdle in my stomach. I pace around the studio as time creeps closer to 12 p.m. with every step. Thoughts flood my mind as I question whether I have lost myself in the temptations of risk. As 12 p.m. arrives, I walk to meet my supervisor inside the studio door. Her calm and comforting energy meets my chaotic and dense energy. Can she sense my fear? I blurt out, "I'm trying something different and bold, and it could be totally off the mark, so please let me know but I'm taking a risk." She smiles in a way that tells me that I am safe here. So, we begin to journey into the studio and meet my new friend, risk.*

In this narrative, I experienced my first memorable encounter with risk in performance practice. This risk was situated inside the studio and during a work-in-progress showing, which led me to understand that risk is not only physical, but also social, emotional, cultural, or cognitive, and occurs within an encounter to an edge (O'Grady, 2017). This edge was related to exploring ritual as a choreographic method by incorporating objects related to my transgressive identity (such as a flogger and bar gag) alongside objects related to my cultural heritage (such as Kali Maa images and red vermillion). A ritual aspect to the creative practice occurred through spatial design and the building of a 'kama world' (Ali, 2011) to activate the senses to unveil memories related to the histories in my body. There was risk in placing these objects together and to uncover how this might shift my body towards new understandings. It allowed me to recognize that taking a risk is to take a chance, to proceed to do something when the outcome is uncertain (Koh, Yeo, & Hung, 2015). Taking a chance is something artists are familiar with, and the uncertainty is part of the creative practice. However, the desire to explore the intersections of my identity led me to question: can I risk potentially appropriating my

cultural heritage? Can I risk offending future audience members? Can I risk bringing hidden parts of myself into the practice? The edge within this initial showing unraveled a potential boundary or threshold that I was eager to cross to discover new embodiments, movement, and ways of *becoming* in performance practice that provided space to all aspects of these identities. By recognizing this edge through bodily experiences, such as pacing around the studio and the dreaded pre-performance nausea, I was led to contemplate: what is this boundary? What are these barriers?

Risk pushes us to face boundaries that arrive unconsciously, consciously and through normative behaviors designed to protect you, create safer contexts, and push us to consider what could go wrong. But these boundaries and barriers also exist through oppressions within dance contexts. As a queer Indian woman born and raised in Aotearoa, I began to recognize these boundaries in this first encounter with risk, the memories of oppressions that have latched onto my body was communicated through my body's hesitance to explore new ideas in relation to intersecting identities. Risk in *Mukti Vidhi* became an exploration to disturb and shock the viewer (and me) to challenge these normative conventions and assumptions (Hudson, 2006). The intuitive pull towards the flogger and bar gag had shocked my body and the memories that the moving body held. Incorporating these two objects laden with sexual connotations led to fears of appropriating my cultural heritage, shame, and the potential of getting it wrong. In *Mukti Vidhi*, to embrace the activation of taking chances, a safer space to explore choreographic curiosities was required alongside a human witness to give energy into the work and encourage or challenge creative outputs.

In choreographic practice, there is great risk in work-in-progress showings. It is a vulnerable space, where the foundations feel shaky, unsettling, and incomplete. Within this first performance practice showing, tarot cards with images of Kali Maa stabilized and grounded my energy as a performer and acted as additional witnesses to the work. The images of Kali Maa resonated for their rageful, dark, and, at times, terrifying portrayal of the Goddess's multiple embodiments. The

combination of Kali Maa images and the objects led to experiencing a connecting thread which entangled all aspects of the work into a cohesive 'kama world' (Ali, 2011). A world that would activate the senses in different ways through ritual elements of texture, taste, sound, feeling, and sight. Additional objects began to arrive into the work following this showing, to further build the world of *Mukti Vidhi* through rituals such as: serpent deities, candles, *rudraksha* beads, a mirror, books, paintings, a wisdom tooth, chili powder, dried *dhal* (lentils), and a skipping rope, alongside human participants to witness this intentional crafting of a safer environment that felt representative of all parts of my identity. An amalgamation of human and nonhuman allowed me to understand that safe spaces are not only human relations, but are also "more-than-human material relations that can involve objects" (Rosenfeld & Noterman, 2014, p. 1348). This ritual of crafting the space surrounding the choreographic practice, allowed the creative practice to delve into uncertain and risky terrain.

Risk, at this stage, unraveled in relation to how I was interacting with the nonhuman objects in this practice, and with the ways I might be perceived as a performer in this first development showing. As an Indian woman, I have felt othered and oppressed in dance spaces within the academy, as many of us have. However, what might happen when we face those moments of courage that we have not yet encountered before? As an emerging artist and researcher, this moment was critical for my vulnerability and courage to continue to evolve, and to learn how to honor my artistic voice as a woman of color in the academy. To be witnessed in a risk-taking endeavor when the foundations feel unstable could move a performer towards delving deeper into curiosities with risk to unravel the boundaries that exist. As I was witnessed in this first activation by my supervisor who I had been working closely with, I found an edge through felt sensations, emotions, bodily experiences of my palms sweating and heart racing that led me to understand that there is an edge here. This became the catalyst to delve deeper into where that edge came from and what it meant for my moving body and intersecting identities.

April 13<sup>th</sup> 2022: The darkness



Figure 2: *The darkness*. Mukti Vidhi 2022, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand.

*It is cold outside, and the wind feels icy on my skin. I walk around with a pair of thermal leggings, track pants, a long sleeve thermal, two jumpers, a puffer jacket, and gloves. It is during this time of multiple layers on my body that I feel completely shattered by the practice. I read histories that relate to the oppressions I have experienced and those that the women in my bloodline have experienced. It is grey and gloomy outside, and it is grey and gloomy in my internal body. I turn the heater on high in my movement space at home, close the curtain to the outside world, change my clothes, light candles, and sit. What do I do with all this knowledge? How can I put myself together again?*

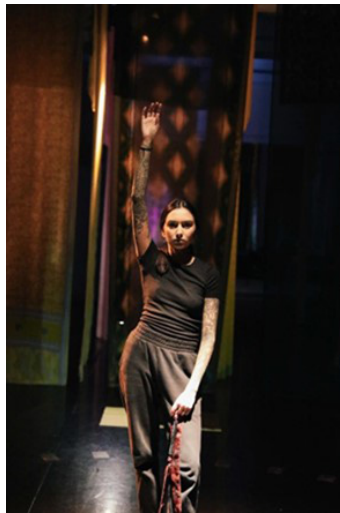
This second pivotal encounter with risk led me towards the zone of risk being dangerous for my well-being as a solo human practitioner in the work. Through isolation, contemplation, education, and practice – I delved into memories of injustice and uncovered some of the roots of oppression that existed within my maternal lineage. It was during this time I was reminded of Ahmed's (2017) words where she stated, "no wonder feminist work is often about timing: sometimes we are too fragile to do this work; we cannot risk being shattered because we are not ready to put ourselves back together again" (p. 27). Just as feminist work focuses on timing, so does navigating risk. Risk

became intertwined with this practice through a desire to question, experience, and entangle the fragmented parts of my identity. Risk pulls courage, resilience, and endurance out of us in an embodied and felt way, and much like anger, it requires us to act. To encounter risk in an embodied way is to unravel the boundaries that have pushed our bodies into certain ways of being, doing, and *becoming* in the world toward alternative ways of being, doing, and becoming. This boundary lingers in the *in-betweenness* of imagination and real, the lived experiences and the dreams, the histories and the hope for the future (O'Grady, 2017). During this period of development, the blurring of these lines became vibrant which led the lines to blur between the past and present, hovering in the liminal space between the two. The words on the pages of historical texts such as Vedic (ancient Indian) philosophies both empowered the development of *Mukti Vidhi* and were at times, problematic and oppressive towards women. Both the empowering and the challenging aspects seeped into my present life. As I continued to question and speak about the difficulties and uncovered challenging personal and intergenerational experiences of wrong-doings, I was beginning to be in the wrong again and the sensation of being wronged magnified (Ahmed, 2017). Unsure of what my present was and what the past was led me to consider whether through the practice, the two became entangled.

Risk in *Mukti Vidhi* is not exclusively related to politically charged acts within the performance practice that lead me to feel unsettled, comfortable, or joyous. The risk is also in the journey to arrive at that place, the place that the audience sees. It is in the experience of how far are you willing to go to get there? To the place you are eager to hold in your hands? What are you willing to go through, to uncover, to learn about to become-with a practice that is critically responsive to the past, a past that still lingers in our present day? In this period of time, I was pulled to isolate and sit with the histories, stories, and memories as I was uncovering ways to become-with them through practice, movement, journaling, creative activations and deep reflection. It was not a practice of learning about them from a view of

separation, but rather, it was through pulling the past into the practice that allowed me to develop movement activations. This meant being open to being wounded, to the “danger of unmasking and seeing ourselves as we are” (Yancy, 2018, p. 1256), and confronting historical truths as they were, alongside their enduring resonance in the present. This shift of time, of bringing the past into the present, led the creative activations and choreographic pathways to be charged with history, meaning, and feelings to consider alternative pathways towards future becoming’s that provide space for these intersecting identities. Through this, there was a blurring of binaries and dualisms and an entangling of all the components of the practice that lived and danced on the edge of many worlds.

*September 16<sup>th</sup> 2023: Becoming-with risk.*



*Figure 3: Mukti Vidhi, University of Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand.*

*There is a targeted energy focus towards the center of the space and a subtle smell of potent chili powder in front of you. Your heart begins to race in anticipation and presence, waiting, wondering, uncertain. As if you are waiting for the arrival of someone. This feeling continues to expand and grow as your presence deepens and the collective energy*



*in the space synchronizes. There is a magnetic pull between you and me. A cord between us that feels taut and unbreakable. A connection that feels beyond our bodies. As if our bodies are morphing together. You start to feel warm as if you were the one who licked the chili powder. It is in your body, you can feel the heat inside of your stomach, and the taste — you can taste the burning sensation on your tongue. Suddenly, you feel an expansion in the space. Where the boundaries of the wall dissipate and become non-existent. The arrival of someone has entered and you witness a morphed figure with her eyes wide open and her tongue exposed like Kali Maa locking eyes with you. It feels like they have locked eyes for far too long, will they look away? For a moment, you wonder if they remember who you are. You see the unfolding of repressed rage through her body's shaking and movement.*

This performance showing was a final work-in-progress development in preparation for the final output of my PhD. The intention was to continue to work with the edges of risk in the choreographic design and to be in direct relation to the audience. What occurred that evening was a blurring of the edges of risk towards a becoming-with risk. This unraveled through crafting a safer space which consisted of 57 sarees hanging from the scaffolds, four altars, incense sticks, lighting, sound design, a single wisdom tooth, books, journals, rudraksha beads, anklets, a candle, water, incense ash, meditation, and politically charged activations working in the realms of anger, feminist endurance, risk, pain, and pleasure. I discovered early in my postgraduate study that I did not feel safe to create or delve into my creative process in a neutral space and that this experience is not uncommon for many students, and especially for students of color (hooks, 1994). Objects can transform spaces, turning them into gateways to another world or space which could create safer spaces (Rosenfeld & Noterman, 2014), particularly for those who may feel displaced in the academy.

In my first encounter with risk during a showing with my supervisor, I understood very clearly through my bodily responses that to delve into risk requires safety in various forms. This safety often turned into rituals,

such as practical safety: closing the curtains to the studio, locking the door, preparing my body, and placing mats on the floor. It could relate to emotional safety, such as: regulating your nervous system, sharing experiences with others, allowing emotions to move through, seeking support and friendship. It also includes cognitive safety: understanding the outcomes of activations or risk, educating into the concepts and contexts you engage in, listening, and retaining a mind-body connection. Additionally, in this final showing, I discovered spiritual or energetic safety which can include: creating protective barriers in the space, heightening your intuition (both artistic and personal), being aware and conscious of who arrives into the room, protecting your energy as a performer, calling on your ancestors to stand with you, and building the space through ritual design to revitalize knowledge and experiences. These realms of safety were discovered and experimented with through ritual practices, and when all these components of safety were considered, becoming-with risk occurred for my practice.

When working with concepts of ritual, autoethnography and identity, there is a responsiveness to the world and the experiences outside of the creative practice shift and mold the choreographic design towards new directions. This world through a postqualitative and critical posthumanist lens does not sit still (Murriss, 2021). It is constantly changing politically, socially, technologically, and environmentally. To think creatively through ritual towards *becoming* is to consider how these changes may inform our body and what we might hope for in future becomings. I was raised with rituals as a strict and stringent process with rules and regulations that felt belittling at times, especially as a woman. I could not participate in rituals if I was on my menstrual cycle, I could not wear certain colors, and I would have to sit in certain positions. Rituals were choreographed and each element had a purpose. The term ritual, in this research, has evolved through risk to become fluid, porous, and responsive to what I experience in the world, which allowed the ideas to become fluid in the process. Initially, ritual was a method that invited a clear outcome or goal; over time, the outcome has blurred and encouraged a process of listening

to what arises in the practice in relation to external experiences. Becoming-with research considers how the research methods, such as ritual, could become renewed in every moment, every point of experimentation not as it was previously explored but “as it is now in a now that is already past” (LeBlanc & Kaufmann, 2021). Where delving into memory, intergenerational experiences, and cultural heritage through history can unravel the entanglement between the past and present and recognizes these pasts as the building of the present. This has led me to consider how the present can be built and shaped through creative practice to alter the direction of future explorations. These moments of risk that initially felt *risky* in my practice had now felt comfortable and safer and each encounter with risk was strengthening my stamina for it, allowing me to continue to work towards the infinite edges and become entangled with risk in the creative practice.

In this final development showing of *Mukti Vidhi* I became curious about the ways that choreographic design could create new ways of being human and nonhuman at the same time (Bayley, 2018). This entanglement of human and nonhuman can be seen through the moment I embodied Kali Maa and her imagery and the rage that moment unveiled. It can be seen through the cards placed in the space as an embodiment of her and all that she represents. As the space began to feel expansiveness, there was a posthuman undoing of binaries such as body/mind, body/brain, self/other, emotion/reason, human/animal (Taylor, 2016). This undoing cracked open my experience as a performer in the space to move repressed rage, darkness, and sadness through creatively choreographed movement. The collaboration between the chili powder and the senses on my moving body steered me to consider the ways in which a posthuman becoming recognizes the agentic force of objects for their ability to affect change and transformation on the moving body. The pathway of nudging the practice to expand its capacity for risk through each development period led me to unlock this repressed rage, to be present with the work and feel the ways the objects affected my senses in response to each identity. In the narrative above, it reflects

the entanglement between all human and nonhuman others to allow creative movement to expand and be reflective of all that was experienced in the choreographic journey.

In the development of *Mukti Vidhi*, risk unraveled a journey toward the multifaceted experience of navigating personal and cultural histories through an intersectional identity. This article illuminated some of my engagement with risk as an intuitive pull towards challenging the boundaries of normative conventions and revisiting personal experiences and history through creative activations. Through intentional crafting of safer spaces, which encompassed practical, physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual safety, a becoming-with risk was experienced. Ritual practices in my upbringing were initially experienced as methodical performances with predetermined outcomes and elements, however, through risk and intersectional perspectives, ritual began to evolve into a process that was responsive to the unfolding present of the creative practice. Risk can uncover vulnerability and courage to critique and question where the boundaries exist in our moving body and allows us to consider new possibilities through movement and creative design. The journey encapsulated within this article is a glimpse into the complexities of identity and ritual in choreographic processes and the ways we might become-with risk in a fluid and changing world.

## **Author Biography**

Alesha Mehta is a dance researcher of Indian heritage from Aotearoa and a current doctoral candidate in Dance Studies at Waipapa Taumata Rau, the University of Auckland. Alesha's research explores liberation within performance practice through ritualistic methodologies and Vedic philosophies towards feminist and posthuman approaches to choreographic practice. Her research engages with intergenerational rage, endurance, labour, and ritual. Alesha is also a researcher and coordinator for the community collective Aunty's House which seeks to uplift the South Asian diaspora in Aotearoa.

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