

# Chapter 36. Positionality as a Simulacrum

Shiva Mainaly  
UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS

On December 16, 2022, I tucked my notebook under my arm, squinting in the bright Indian sun at Khajuraho, a tiny town in Madhya Pradesh, India. As a doctoral candidate studying rhetoric and composition at the University of Louisville, I had to make a field visit to these famous Hindu and Jain monument complexes—sprawling across a 20-kilometer area of Khajuraho—in search of authentic evidence of lost ambient rhetoric in the Indian subcontinent. To me, the intricate carvings along the behemoth monuments' exteriors hinted at creativity par excellence, offering a matchless model of a homespun alternative ambient rhetoric in India. Of these monuments, Kandariya Mahadeva Temple, Lakshmana, and Devi Jagadamba stunned me to bits because no monument had demonstrated such an audacity to trigger rhetorical affectability around its vicinity. To my utter dismay, I felt my pulse quicken. The nagging doubt driving my research, which aimed to explore the ambient rhetoric of sandstone materiality native to Khajuraho monument complexes, tended to be acute in that I had the challenge of ushering in almost a fragment of lost Indian rhetorical practice as part of my doctoral dissertation.

I had stacked my dissertation on the notion that a researcher's positionality concerning their subjects was a carefully crafted narrative. A simulation only! At the University of Louisville, my PhD cohorts once argued that a researcher's positionality indelibly shapes the questions they ask, methods they employ, and conclusions they draw, whether conscious of it or not. But I had my doubts. Roaming around the monument complex's entire site, hearing from the mouths of locals about dozens of reasons behind the construction of controversial monuments, and seeing evidence of how meaning shifts over time, I inched closer to finding evidence of the simulacrum I believed positionality to be.

Stepping inside the first shrine, I observed bas-reliefs depicting divine beings alongside everyday acts: Gods and goddesses amid courtship, music, and battle scenes. I drifted toward carvings of nymphs in sensuous precision, erotic prowess, and profane pristineness. Their delicate stone limbs intertwined with medieval warriors, elite courtiers, and kings in acts of visceral pleasure and intimacy. "My position as Nepal-born, Louisville-based doctoral candidate shapes all facets of my inquiry," I effusively whispered. Those identifiers felt evanescent during my fantastic foray into the ambient rhetoric of the Khajuraho monument complexes.

As my observation deepened, I moved toward the next monument, tentatively built around 1000 AC when Khajuraho was the political and cultural heart of the Chandel. It came to my attention that my positionality should fade before these magnificent scenes of a lost empire, thousands of miles and years away. I gazed into a massive stone yoni, the abstract female counterpart of the lingam. Head tilted back, I traced its concentric upward rings. More than a coherent tenor of my thoughts, it is the messy and meandering impressions that my field visit brought on in my mind because I faced the same question every visitor has been asking since time immemorial: why is the sacred space desecrated? And to what end? Instantaneously, it came to my mind that the longer I remained in India, the more tenuous that position felt, the reason being that a variegated affects and emotions tended to overwhelm me in a manner most uncanny. Roaming observantly and curiously through temple after temple in reflective solitude, I watched light and shadow converge on princes and princesses dancing, celestial nymphs bathing, and gods battling demons. At this juncture, I pondered scholars' fierce defense of positionality as I grew aware of the very transient and flimsy nature of the subject-object spectrum.

At Khajuraho, there was no Kentucky soul, no Nepali immigrant ... only vivid human figures exuding their affectability from a medieval realm inscribed on monuments' exterior and interior walls. The essence of those carvings, sculptures, and iconographies came not from what others named them but from the truth their artists instilled in cold sandstone materiality. As a rich amber sunset crowned the Western Group, I ended where I had begun. With my Americanized Nepalese scholarly disposition at odds with Khajuraho dialect and Hindi language-based communication, a nagging impulse stirred once more, like the first time I had questioned positionality. Identities that had seemed solid back home now struck me as fragile constructs, as coreless fabrications: No more than a mirage. If such a core part of positionality as a researcher could feel so ephemeral and contingent, what did that make of claims that position indelibly shapes perspective?