

# Lives, Letters, and Rhythms of Law: Choreopoetry as a Socio-Legal Method

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don't wear  
    anything that reveals  
your thick skin  
    the courage beneath  
your hair strands  
    the genius they keep  
your red lips  
    the dissent concealed  
lady justice  
    might be blindfolded  
but the men  
    guarding her aren't.

## **Context, Questions, and Caveats**

These lines are from an original three-minute-short film titled *(IN)VISIBLE*, which analyses and communicates some of the lived realities of women-identifying lawyers in India (Billa and Bagga 2024).<sup>2</sup> The poetic, embodied, visual, and sonic elements in the film, which I collectively term as 'choreopoetry', highlight the complex ways

in which the legal system, its agents, and the social reality they are coding, co-constitute each other (Billa 2023).

Note the difference between my use of the plural *lived realities* of women lawyers, as opposed to the singular *social reality* in the context of legal coding. This essay fundamentally deals with this difference and offers methodological tools to bridge the gap between the two. The premise here is that an observed social reality—as understood by critical realists (Bhaskar 2008)—comprises various lived realities. This analytical description of social reality as a complex sum of lived realities and more has a dual significance. First, by coding social reality, the legal system is also coding the lived realities of its agents. For example, law codes us into identity categories such as gender, race, caste, and religion, among others, based on different aspects of our lived realities, such as our occupation, dressing, economic assets and so on. Second, law does not only code our identities but actively shapes them by ascribing differential value to different aspects of our lived realities. The hypervisibility of veils in a legal coding of the identities of Muslim women (Kapur 2018) and the invisibility of race in a legal coding of employment contracts (Ashiagbor 2021) are some examples.

Lived realities, or aspects thereof, which do not yet have the shared tools of language to easily seep into our understandings of social reality are often ignorantly or deliberately excluded from the processes of legal coding and, by extension, from the black letter of the law. This lack of shared tools of understanding both stems from and results in what Miranda Fricker calls ‘epistemic injustice’ (Fricker 2007). Epistemic injustice is the wrong caused to someone based on their perceived credibility by individuals, institutions, or systems. Consider, for example, ways in which aspects of lived realities of transgender persons, such as their embodied and emotional experiences, have been legally (mis)coded across the world (Jain and Rhoten 2020; Wigley 2025). Without a meaningful attempt to rectify epistemic injustice, the legal system stands a risk of perpetuating it by reinforcing a false understanding of lived realities that have historically been misunderstood at best and violently silenced at worst.

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This essay seeks to demonstrate how the legal academy can potentially dismantle the perpetuating cycles of epistemic injustice by accounting for information in the forms of letters, lives, and rhythms, towards coding social reality more wholistically and accurately (from the perspective of those whose realities are being coded, towards attaining epistemic, and eventually, social justice). By positioning the legal academy as an active site of legal coding, I demonstrate why it matters what methodologies we adopt as researchers and what information about lived realities these methodologies allow us to code. This essay thus explores the question: how can we, as researchers, ensure a more wholistic and accurate coding of social reality that renders legible and includes previously ignored lived realities? In that sense, how can we begin addressing epistemic injustice from within the legal academy while examining the social reality that underpins it?

Beyond this introduction, the essay is divided in three further sections. In Section 2, I clarify what I mean by ‘legal coding’ and how a selective legal coding of realities—or aspects of those realities—perpetuates epistemic injustice. Having defined the problem, I then situate legal coding in law schools, demonstrating how legal coding processes—embedded within the hierarchies of knowledge production—favour some forms of information over others. In Section 3, I demonstrate some of the previously underexplored ways to expand the scope of realities we can account for through multimodal methods, thereby opening pathways to study and code social reality more wholistically and accurately. This includes a discussion on choreopoetry as a multimodal method of data analysis, as demonstrated by *(IN)VISIBLE*. In Section 4, I highlight some limitations and emphasise the value of multimodal analyses in qualitative socio-legal research to address epistemic injustice from within the legal academy.

This short essay develops choreopoetry as a qualitative method for capturing previously excluded forms of information to bridge lives and letters in socio-legal research. As a critical, feminist, and decolonial method (Angrosino and Perez 2000; Yoon-Ramierz and Ramirez 2023), choreopoetry remains closely aligned with the praxis

of critical approaches if used in the spirit of including (rather than excluding) more wholistic and accurate information about previously marginalised, oppressed, excluded, and hermeneutically misunderstood lived realities. The ethical approach of the method further calls for centring the voices of those (women in this case) who have historically been silenced (Doherty 2024).

### **Legal Coding, Information Flows, and Epistemic Injustice**

I use the term ‘legal coding’ in the same sense as used in Information Theory of Law, which models the legal system as an information system where information flows determine the relationship between law and social reality (Billa 2023). Legal coding, for the purposes of our discussion, can be defined as the multi-sited process by which social reality is coded into legal language and concepts. In other words, various aspects of social reality are rendered legible and relevant for law through the process of legal coding. Examples of concepts where legal coding has shaped social reality, often in ways that have reinforced pre-existing inequalities include ‘data’ (Billa 2025), ‘bodies’ (Adébişi 2023), ‘work’ (Adams 2022), ‘time’ (Grabham 2016), ‘contract’ (Deakin 2015) and so on. To ensure a more wholistic and accurate coding of social reality, improving the legal coding processes is a crucial starting point.

Just as any other meaning-making process, legal coding is exclusive, exclusionary, and selective by design. It is influenced by the individual choices of its agents – legal experts, broadly defined – as well as the reflexive structures and institutions they are operating within. It therefore matters who is controlling what information gets coded into legal language, how it gets coded, and whom the structures of legal coding are designed for. These exclusions can be categorised as instances of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007).

According to Fricker, epistemic injustice can either be testimonial or hermeneutical. Testimonial injustice, on one hand, is a wrong caused to the speaker because the hearer deprives them of a voice by attributing lesser credibility to what is being said based on the speaker’s identity (ibid: 34). Hermeneutical injustice, on the other hand, is a wider

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phenomenon where the speaker is wronged because of an inability to articulate their own experience due to a systemic lack of shared language or tools to describe their experience (ibid: 147). Not only does the legal coding process commonly reinforce testimonial injustice because of individual biases of experts, testimonial injustice also seeps into black letter law, creating perpetuating lock-ins of hermeneutical injustice. Legal coding, therefore, entrenches the correlation between testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice, making it cyclical.

One of the reasons why the legal system has a tendency to become a site of epistemic injustice is that legal coding centres and prioritises textual forms of information over other forms (Giddens 2017). Textual information—including written and spoken word—is easier to code with more accuracy and is considered more legible and relevant for legal coding. By design, legal coding processes risk ignoring other forms of information about lived realities—such as embodied, emotional, sensory, temporal and spatial aspects of lived realities. Legal coding, therefore, risks (mis)coding the lived realities of those whose voices have historically been silenced and whose lived realities have remained hermeneutically misunderstood, such as the lived realities of transgender persons, indigenous persons, asylum seekers, disabled persons, racialised workers and various other vulnerable groups. Centring textual forms of information in the legal coding process results in a legal system that does not only exclude but is in fact unequipped to code certain realities in the first place.

One way to expand the legibility of lived realities for law, is to expand the scope of the *forms* of information that experts are coding. Given the rigour demanded from academic work, the legal academy – widely defined to include knowledge production directly related to law as a discipline – is a suitable site to begin this crucial work of rendering legible new realities, to arrive at new meanings and understandings. Forms of information that go beyond the text include embodied, felt, spatial, and temporal forms of information, which I collectively refer to as *rhythms*. I borrow the definition of ‘rhythms’ from sociologist Henri Lefebvre, who defines this as the interaction of space, time,

and energy (Lefebvre 2013). Therefore, to understand the rhythms of meaning-making processes, especially legal coding processes, we need to analyse how space, time, light, sound, and bodies interact with each other at the institutional sites of legal coding. By considering both the rhythms and texts of information, we can not only enhance our current understandings of epistemic injustice but also begin to address it.

It is important to note here that even though I distinguish rhythms as *forms* of information that are separate from text, this categorisation by no means indicates mutual exclusivity. In fact, the premise here is that rhythmic information intertwines with textual information in complex, often inseparable ways—to eventually seep into the black letter law. A sole focus on textual forms in legal coding of lived realities can, therefore, never be complete. Purely text-based methods and outputs cannot wholistically account for lived realities, particularly those that do not yet have the text to describe them.

To equip the legal system to code non-textual forms of information—such as rhythms—we must equip the legal academy to study, capture, and code new forms of information about lived realities. I use the methodological tool of rhythms in *(IN)VISIBLE*, to introduce the rhythms of legal coding as my object of analysis. *(IN)VISIBLE* presents qualitative evidence about how some identity groups, specifically women, experience the structures of legal coding in their mundane professional lives.

### **Choreopoetry as a Qualitative Method**

*(IN)VISIBLE* combines original audio excerpts from 25 interviews with legal experts in India with Kathak-based movement, spoken word poetry, sound, and colour. The film not only communicates qualitative evidence of textual manifestations of epistemic injustice but also presents, visibilises, and analyses its rhythmic manifestations through embodied, poetic, sonic, and visual analyses. When combined, the method concretises as ‘choreopoetry’, examining how the rhythms of legal coding structurally and epistemically exclude women.

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Choreopoetry is an interdisciplinary art form that blends movement, spoken word, music, and visual elements to create powerful expressions of lived experience. Pioneered by playwright and poet Ntozake Shange in the 1970s, the term was first used formally by a collective of black feminist poets, dancers, and musicians, to create a new artistic expression that transcends the conventional boundaries between literary and performing arts, in a departure from mainstream Western poetry and storytelling traditions (theseoqueen 2024; Sengupta 2025). These origins in resistance and protest art further exemplify how the use of choreopoetry in academic research can help dismantle Eurocentric hierarchies of knowledge-production, while enabling us to go beyond the text—both as a *method* and an *object of analysis*—to examine and render legible new forms of information, coding previously excluded aspects of lived realities.

Sociologist Patricia Leavy comments on various arts-based research practices, such as narrative, poetry, music, performance, dance and movement, and visual arts (Leavy 2020). Building on Leavy’s work, my attempt in this essay is to lay the theoretical foundations for developing choreopoetry as a qualitative method of data analysis, particularly in socio-legal research,<sup>3</sup> through an analysis of these approaches in *(IN)VISIBLE*.

### A. Poetry

Leavy argues that the representation of data in a poetic form is more than just an alternative way of presenting data and can evoke different meanings from the data (Leavy 2020: 84). In *(IN)VISIBLE*, I take this a step further, by demonstrating how poetry could be used to not only communicate and evoke, but also to analyse data. *(IN)VISIBLE* allowed me to group my empirical data based on the rhythm and

tonality of my research participants' voices, as opposed to the traditional practice of grouping them based on textual and substantive themes. These voices were then punctuated with my own poetic analysis that captures the exclusionary structural rhythms of the legal profession that my participants navigate in their professional lives. The repetition of the line 'Lady Justice might be blindfolded, but the men guarding her aren't', for instance, demonstrates the effects of male gaze on the perceived credibility of women legal experts, while the visual analysis challenges the coloured neutrality of law.

### **B. Music**

The sonic interpretation of these exclusionary rhythms in the film helps amplify the emotions, as felt by both the speakers (my participants) and the hearer (myself), extending the meaning contained within the text of these interviews.<sup>4</sup> The weakness of the medium of music is its strength, because there is no assumption, like the one made by text, that the message sent by the receiver is exactly the same as the message received (Leavy 2020: 188). In that sense, there is epistemic humility in the way music presents one interpretation of reality, without making grand claims about its accuracy in different contexts. The same humility is adopted by choreopoetry in *(IN)VISIBLE*, where music is used to evoke the sonic rhythms of legal coding, as experienced by my participants, while making a meaningful attempt to enhance accuracy of what is being conveyed through accompanied spoken word.

### **C. Performance**

Leavy argues that performance can bring research to life and convey academic scholarship to a wider audience (Leavy 2020: 184). The *process* as opposed to the *product* of performance can cultivate epistemological, theoretical, and methodological innovation (Leavy 2020: 185). While the dissemination potential of performance cannot be denied, the process of performance generation can significantly enhance the analysis itself, opening pathways to render non-verbal and non-written – or collectively, non-textual – forms of information flows legible for coding. The production process of *(IN)VISIBLE* helped me consider various forms of information about my participants' lived experiences

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beyond what they *talked* about. These include how they *embodied* their experiences while talking about them, the *emotion* in their voices, and how they remembered their experiences. A purely text-based analysis could not have accounted for all this additional information about the repetitive and temporal nature of epistemic injustice.

### D. Dance

Leavy's case for dance as method rests in the way she described the body as a source of knowledge and locus of meaning, invoking ways to look at dance both as 'data' and as 'research' (Leavy 2020: 159). Sean Mulcahy extends this to call for 'dance as legal method' (Mulcahy 2021). *(IN)VISIBLE* demonstrates the use of dance and movement as legal method through its choreography, which embodies the structural rhythms of legal coding as lived by the research participants. It is important to note here that since both the choreography and the dancing body in *(IN)VISIBLE* are mine, the embodied experiences of my participants cannot be neatly separated from my own embodied analysis. While this convergence strengthens my analysis—where both my positionality and previous lived reality align with that of my participants—I acknowledge that this convergence might make the analysis less accurate in other cases.

Choreopoetry is, therefore, only one of many possible methods that can effectively examine rhythms of legal coding. It offers a wider toolkit, containing embodied, poetic, musical, and visual tools that can be used to study aspects of lived realities which have not yet found the shared tools of language to seep into legal text, as well as the rhythms of spaces, institutions, and systems that these realities occupy. My larger argument is, therefore, about plurality of methods and openness to engage with and learn from knowledge systems that are better equipped to code the non-textual. While I have presented choreopoetry as a qualitative method at the stage of data analysis, it can also be used (in its entirety, or through individual practice-based methods) at the stage of data collection. Engaging with embodied, visual, musical, and poetic methods to collect data might offer new language and tools to articulate lived realities for the legal system, rendering legible what was previously excluded from legal coding.

## **Cautions and Conclusions**

Before concluding, it is important to scaffold my arguments for multimodal methods, especially embodied analyses such as a choreopoetic one, considering three important limitations. The first limitation relates to the scope of its reach. My present argument for coding rhythmic information, using non-textual methods such as choreopoetry, is restricted to the academy as a site for legal coding. This is primarily because coding of information elsewhere is not subjected to the kind of rigour that is demanded of academic work (for example, by way of peer-review, ethical checks, methods training and so on). The lack of these checks at other sites of legal coding can either lead to inaccurate or ambiguous coding of rhythmic information (Tampubolon 2025), or weaponised (mis)coding to further exclude lives. While there might be scope to consider non-textual aspects of lived realities during stakeholder consultations in a legislative process, or testimonial accounts of a victim or witness in the courtroom, for instance, my present case for choreopoetry as method is, for now, restricted to legal coding within the academy.

This brings me to the second limitation. Even within the academy, the use of non-textual tools to include some realities stand the risk of epistemically excluding others. For example, in one of the rooms where I screened *(IN)VISIBLE*, there were other films featuring the dance form of ballet. After some of the screenings, one of the ballet dancers in the room was delighted to have quietly formed an ‘exclusive club’ with other dancers present in the room. This is because she had managed to appreciate layers of meanings hidden behind the subtle movements of the dancing body, allowing her and other members of the ‘club’ to grasp more information from the embodied analysis, as compared to what was grasped by the non-dancers in the room. This moment presents a risk that researchers need to be wary of. Shifting from one form of exclusive language (textual) to another (rhythmic) does not dispense the burden of reflecting on, critiquing, and addressing the power structures both forms of information are embedded within. My choice of the dance form of Kathak in *(IN)VISIBLE* is not immune to that burden either.

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Even though this choice purely rests in my positionality as a trained dancer that equips me to interpret my participants' experiences using a certain kind of choreography, the selectivity of this dance form might position my analysis within the exclusionary structures of caste, class, and gender inequalities that Kathak, as most other Indian classical art forms, carries with it (Putcha 2023; Krishna 2018).

This brings me to the last limitation, which is more of a caution. While non-textual methods allow us to capture the rhythmic forms of information in ways that can help code previously excluded aspects and lives of social reality, they also bring with them additional burdens of justification, perhaps rightly so. These burdens of justification can be partly attributed to the Eurocentric hierarchies of knowledge-production that have historically favoured textual accounts of knowledge over others. However, these burdens also exist because of the relatively higher accuracy with which text can convey meanings—even when they are incomplete meanings.

Embodied and rhythmic methods like dance and poetry, visual methods like film and painting, and musical methods centring sound might leave too much power with the recipient to interpret the information being communicated. The lack of specificity in coding and communicating lived realities through non-textual means can taint the information with the lived realities and biases of recipients themselves, risking a further exclusion of the realities these methods set out to include. While this can be a strength in cases of lived realities that have not found shared linguistic tools to express them yet, it is also a weakness that researchers must admit, acknowledge, and address, especially where multimodal methods may lead to a further silencing of voices that could have voiced these meanings more accurately. One way to do this is to be transparent about positionality, while reflexively and rigorously combining these methods with other forms of inquiry that capture textual, rhythmic, and other forms of information, especially when this information can be captured through the voices of those whose realities it represents. Just as the information coded by text-based methods is incomplete, so is the information coded by multimodal

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methods like creative arts-based methods. A mixed-methods approach is, therefore, best equipped to code lived realities more holistically and accurately, by rendering various forms of information about lives, letters, and rhythms of social reality legible for legal coding. Just as textual methods, rhythmic methods when used solely also code incomplete realities. Whether or not we can ever code social reality in its entirety remains a question for another time.

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### Endnotes

- 1 Research Associate, Centre for Business Research, University of Cambridge and Associate Fellow, ESRC Centre for Digital Futures at Work, UK. I am grateful to my PhD supervisor Simon Deakin for generously supervising and relentlessly supporting my experiments with innovative methodologies. I also thank Shubham Jain, Ira Chadha-Sridhar, and Devarchan Banerjee for critical feedback; as well as the organisers and participants of the Kings College London Interdisciplinary Residence on ‘Conceptual Innovation, Methods, and Law’, the Socio-Legal Studies Association Conference ‘Law/Dance’ track, and the Cambridge Social Ontology Summer School for constructively engaging with the film. Special thanks to Cambridge Creative Encounters, Cambridge School of Visual and Performing Arts, and the production team of (IN)VISIBLE: Aash Bagga, Xinyi Wang, Shubham Jain, and Silvia-Theodora Teodorescu for their creative generosity.
- 2 My use of the term ‘women-identifying lawyers’ indicates that my use of ‘women’ as an identity category for the rest of this essay includes transgender and non-binary persons who self-identify as women.
- 3 Choreopoet Safiya Kamaria Kinshasa’s artistic practice has partly theorised, and demonstrated, choreopoetry in practice, but a comprehensive account of ‘choreopoetry as a research method’ is yet to be developed in theory: Kinshasa 2022.
- 4 While the participants are the speakers and I am the hearer in this case, it is important to point here that I am as much of a knower as my participants are in the institutional context of epistemic injustice being discussed here. This is because of two reasons—my own positionality and experience of having shared similar embodied experiences, and the power dynamics of these interviews where my participants’ positions were relatively more elite and senior than mine.

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