Introduction

New York was cold in December 1880 when the *nachwali*[1] Sahebjan, who had traveled from India[2] with other company members to perform in Augustin Daly's theater production *Zanina*, went into labor and gave birth to her baby boy. To many New Yorkers' amazement, Sahebjan was back on her feet within days, performing with her troupe. She stomped her feet on the hard, cold stage floors, turning softly so that the cloth she wore spun out from her body as she gestured to a carefully selected love song. Her troupe was featured during the intermission between acts of the main show, and they had only thirty minutes to make their mark. It was difficult to know what would please the audience. Initially they received excited applause, but within a week, the audience had dwindled. The baby, too, did not thrive. He became sick, and when February came and the weather grew colder, he died. The doctors said he had had typhomalarial fever. Sahebjan's son had been a citizen of the United States, if only for a brief time. Sahebjan, on the other hand, was merely a visitor. She had come to the United States a contract laborer and was forced to leave after the show's failure.

I encountered Sahebjan in 2000 in warm, sunny Southern California, while studying in the library archives of the University of California–Irvine. A few years earlier, in 1996, my friend, dancer and guru Ramya Harishankar (a naturalized U.S. citizen), had given birth to a healthy son, an American citizen, who is now fifteen years old. Ramya went back to dancing within a few weeks of giving birth, performing an Indian classical dance called

Bharata Natyam with her students (collectively known as the Arpana Dance Company) at the William Bristol Civic Auditorium in Bellflower, California. She earns a living through teaching and performing Indian dance.

The parallels and striking differences between these two Indian dancers in the United States—separated by time, class, immigration, citizenship, dance forms, and even their experiences of birth and death—moved me to write *Sweating Saris*. The labor of these dancers giving birth to American citizens propelled me to investigate their labor as dancers. Indian dancers have labored as contract workers and as independent artists in the United States, negotiating the terms of U.S. citizenship in different ways. Considering this complexity, I realized that neither a linear historical narration of their experiences nor an ethnography of my experience of encountering them would suffice. To reveal the complex, intertwining histories of immigration, labor, and the dancing body, I needed to do both.

Drawing on archival records between 1880 and 1907, and ethnographic field research of contemporary Indian dance in Southern California, Australia, and India, this project seeks to understand Indian women dancers as transnational laborers on the global stage. This is not conducted through a linear history because there is no continuous diasporic history, set of bodies, or single dance form to trace. Rather, a genealogical inquiry offers a way of reading an alternative archive, to think through the fragmentation of history and diasporic practices from an embodied perspective and from the vantage point of bodily practices (Foucault 1984).[3] Such a genealogical inquiry does not search for origins and instead demonstrates multiple and contradictory pasts that reveal the effect that power has had on truth. Thus, this reading of Indian dance is a reading of fragments and distortions through movement.

In *Sweating Saris* I look for the "work" of Indian dance, even though the dancers strive to hide their toil by smiling and making their movements seem effortless, belying the effort that goes into performing. But their labor can still be seen through their sweat, blood, tears, slipping or stained saris, callused feet, missteps, or familiar gestures, such as giving the finger. Indian dancers' labor can also become visible through acts such as suing or marrying, even if these acts fail, because they intersect with the law and enter mainstream archives. Dance labor includes the work that goes into costuming the dancer: the making of the sari, bells, ornaments, and flowers that adorn the Indian dancing body.

I cannot sit still as I note the hidden labor of dance, the migration patterns of dancers, and the connection between their successes or failures and immigration laws. In one respect, my body is involved in the research through the act of practicing the dance and through my kinesthetic responses to the information gathered. In another respect, I am restless as I find it imperative to unpack multiple points of view to reveal Indian dance within a broader

political economy. For these reasons, throughout the book, I participate as the "unruly spectator." This unruly spectator offers a feminist perspective on spectatorship and takes an active role in uncovering the ways that power can be negotiated by examining dance mistakes such as a slipping sari, a bleeding foot, or sweaty sari blouses. I become an active spectator in conducting my ethnography of the Indian dance archive and through bodily interaction with dancers at contemporary sites. I also write this book in a manner that requires the reader/spectator to be active. This book is choreographed to follow a circuitous narrative rather than a linear one. Chapters, therefore, must be read as performances and as partial glimpses into the narratives of dancers' lives.

I encountered many dancing bodies in the archives. Some are people who traveled to and lived in the United States, whom I can name. Dancers such as Oomdah, Bhooribai, and Sahebjan danced from the microfilm in front of my eyes. Then there was Ala Bundi, who contracted typhomalaria and died just weeks after Sahebjan's baby died of the same disease. Others remain nameless because the archive has not yet revealed their names to me. Many important but nameless dancers came to Coney Island in 1904 to perform for the show *Durbar of Delhi*. These dancers were historically important because Ruth St. Denis, one of the "mothers" of American modern dance, viewed and was very influenced by their performance. After this bodily encounter with them, St. Denis went on to establish her career as a soloist and choreographer, thereby launching what we know today as American modern dance. Mohammed Ismail, Mogul Khan, and Inayat Khan, as well as several unnamed Indian men, performed with St. Denis on and off for several years as she toured.

These men and women eventually faded from the annals of modern dance. By the late 1920s, there were few Indians left in the United States, and it was not until 1965 that large numbers of Indians began to enter again. Ramya, the dancer who gave birth to a son in Southern California in 1996, was one of the new wave of Indian immigrant dancers who arrived in 1981. Unlike her predecessors, such as Sahebjan, Bhooribai, and Mohammed Ismail, Ramya was granted U.S. citizenship in due course and maintains her residence in the United States. Her student Ahila Gulasekaram (who graces the front cover of this book) is of Sri Lankan descent and was born and brought up in the United States. Glimpses into these dancers' lives suggests that dance is a form of labor that offers not only economic but also cultural capital, albeit in a limited fashion, to its practitioners (Bourdieu 1985).[4] But the circumstances of Indian dancers in the United States vary widely, depending on their class background, and their stories change over time. I use a critical lens to explore forgotten examples or "subjugated knowledges" of Indian dance that do not yet have a place within the larger narrative

of Indian or American dance history (Foucault 1980).[5] Taking up Michel Foucault's call to critical action in examining subjugated knowledges, I ask what would happen if we unmasked these marginally appearing dancing bodies as laborers and what such knowledges would bring.

Considering these dancers as laboring bodies in movement helped shape the key ideas in this book. Attention to movement, a key element in dance, not only destabilizes any fixed notion of identity or claims of cultural purity but also challenges monolithic understandings of citizenship: in other words, transnational, migrant artists can inhabit multiple positions in the spectrum of citizenship—from contract laborer, to F-1 student visa or H-1 work visa holder, to green card holder, to citizen. The various citizenship positions inhabited by Indian dancers can be understood through an examination of the oscillation between their absence and presence in historical archives. These fluctuations are not just about a swing back and forth between fixed positions of visibility and invisibility.

Building on subaltern theorist Gayatri Spivak's (1985, 1988, 1999) and ethnographer Kamala Visweswaran's (1994) arguments, I show how the dancers' experiences illustrate how subalterns can move elusively through modes of representation and occupy different subject positions within a spectrum, embodying various roles. Such a process of mapping subaltern movements is important in understanding the very construction of the archives. I am interested in noting which acts and bodily movements appear in the archives and whether they are centralized as major events, are sidelined as nonevents, or function as historical negatives (Stoler 2010). In the process, I construct my own archive, much as Anjali Arondekar (2009) does. As Jacques Derrida (1998) argues, speech, film, thought, and writing—and I would add dance—are architracings. These traces left behind by individuals—what he also calls the "twinkling of presence"—are not stable or fixed. Yet this twinkling leaves remnants of a human body's movement in the historical record.

Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor is a meditation on dance as labor and the female Indian dancing body as a laboring body. This book challenges dominant approaches to histories of Indian diaspora in the United States as well as to modern dance history. The research on Indian labor in the United States has thus far focused predominantly on male laborers, most likely because, historically, there were greater numbers of Indian men than women traveling to the United States. In addition, the emphasis has been on male laborers who worked on roads and rail systems, on farms, or more recently, in the IT industry. Often, these studies foster stereotypical understandings of the immigrant experience by focusing on men and representing them as victims of racist immigration laws, or as wealthy middle-class professionals who have achieved the American dream. Meanwhile,

studies of Indian dancers are relegated to the aesthetic realm and deemed to have no sociopolitical relevance.[6] I challenge the binary framing of the Indian immigrant experience as one of either manual labor and poverty or white-collar success to prompt a deeper and more complex understanding of immigration policy.

I learned repeatedly in this investigation how the terms of immigration and citizenship in the United States—that is, what it means to "belong" here—are constantly moving and how dancers negotiate these terms. Attending to the labor of transnational dancing bodies, I make visible the notion that citizenship is always "in process." I have observed in writing this book that just as many bodies create the solo dancer (as in the case of Ruth St. Denis in the early twentieth century), so too have collective bodies who move in and out of the spectrum of visibility created the "ideal citizen," such as the model minority Bharata Natyam dancer of the late twentieth century. To make this evident, I move the many marginal figures of Indian female dancers to center stage, where these artists and laborers in Indian American history can tell their untold stories.

Examining Indian dancing women as transnational laborers allows us to reimagine Indian diaspora in the United States as differentially classed, contested, and negotiated. By placing these dancing women and feminized men at center stage, this book turns the spotlight on Indian dance as a form of embodied, gendered labor that transforms our understanding of the politics of Asian American racialization, citizenship, and migration since the late nineteenth century.

Dance as Labor

Although the dancing body is often viewed only in aesthetic terms, it is also a laboring body and works in multiple ways to create art. The dancer labors in training her hands to form mudras.[7] She labors in learning to slap her feet on the ground. She labors to turn and travel effortlessly. Her labor is revealed in sweat and even blood spilled onstage. The sculpted bodily form moving in space is her labor made visible.

Marxist theories posit that labor is separate from the means of production. But in *Culture and Materialism*, Raymond Williams argues that the conditions of production in the work of art-making have been overlooked (1980, 46). In dance, even more than in other disciplines, the labor of dancing cannot be separated from its means of production, the dancing body. Dance is also unique in that labor is equivalent to the product in dance: the dancing body's very "liveness" and the display of its labor in performance produces a dance product. Therefore, the dancing body as a laboring body

disrupts traditional Marxist understandings of the act of labor, the means of production, and the product.

In the aesthetic realm, audiences are trained not to see the labor of dance, but they are still consumers of that effort. In *Sweating Saris*, I contend that it is important to recognize the productive labor of the dancer. If the dancing body's labor is accounted for in politico-economic terms, we begin to see her work within the larger structure of production, labor, and migration.

I examine the conditions of producing dance by focusing on the body's materiality. Raymond Williams suggests (1980, 117) that Marxists have embraced the idea of a physical body differently from psychoanalysts and poststructuralists, who read the body only as signaling subjecthood and/or as a sign. According to Williams, Marxists examine the body as more than a sign and as having material impacts through sweat and labor. Dance and performance scholars, on the other hand, push analysis of the body still further: they posit that the body not only creates physical or material effects but also produces its own forms of discourse.

Dance scholars who have made visible how the body is discursive include Susan Foster (1988), who looks at the body as it writes itself; Marta Savigliano (1995), who examines the politico-historical body; Ann Cooper Albright looks at feminist and material readings of the body (1997); and Jane Desmond (1991), who investigates the cultural body, for example. Others, such as Mark Franko (2002) and Ellen Graff (1997), have built on this work to explore dance and labor. In particular, Franko and Graff have studied performances created for the labor movement, as well as ways that the labor movement inspired modern dancers in the 1930s and 1940s. Going beyond how the labor movement manifested in performance, I examine the intersection between danced labor and race. Considering the experiences of Asian American dance laborers sheds light on how their bodies have been racialized by the performance-going public as well as by the state, and how racialized bodies have migrated to and labored in the United States.

To inspect the intersections between labor, race, and gender in the stories of Indian dancers in the United States, *Sweating Saris* brings together scholarship in Asian American studies on immigration, citizenship, and labor, and particularly women's labor histories.[8]

Dancers as Transnational Labor and Wage Earners

I also raise concerns of third world feminists, transnational feminists,[9] and postcolonial feminists regarding gender and the laboring body. *Sweating Saris* asks that the contentious term *transnational laborer* be reconsidered to include Indian women dancers and several male performers from the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries. I duly note the call of sociologists such as Saskia Sassen (1990); globalization theorists such as Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (1994; 2005); and third world feminist scholars such as Chandra Mohanty, Anne Russo, and Lourdes Torres (1991), who problematize third world women's transnational labor within the twentieth-century politico-historical realities of capital flow and migration. Saskia Sassen's argument in considering transnational labor as a late-twentieth-century phenomenon particular to women is of signficance to this argument. Sassen believes that the reason immigrant labor from the global periphery to the industrialized world is attractive—and the reason spaces such as export processing zones (EPZs) are created—is to employ young women who were previously unwaged workers because they are the most docile form of labor (1990). I am not suggesting that the flow of Indian dancers follows this trajectory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The specifics I discuss are different, but I refer to Indian women dancers as *transnational laborers* because the term allows me to consider dancers who move from peripheral to central spaces of industrialization and capital formation as wage earners (T. Davis 1991)[10] in the formal and informal economy. For instance, Sahebjan and her troupe of *nachwalis* were primarily operating in an informal economy in the 1880s on the streets of Delhi and Kolkata but became wage earners in the formal economy with formal contracts and payment for their performances when they traveled to New York. Ruth St. Denis also operated in the formal economy, emerging as an independent female artist in the early twentieth century by making money through her performances of Indian dances (among other Asian forms). Mohammed Ismail and other Indian men were not formally paid for their services precisely because they were racially emasculated and feminized by St. Denis's body onstage. It is in this murky in-between space that the labor of Mohammed Ismail (who attempted to sue St. Denis) in helping create St. Denis's dances is contested. And although some Indian dance teachers have operated in the informal economy since 1965, most have firmly settled into the formal economy after establishing large schools and dance companies in the United States. This unique phenomenon of independent Indian women as wage-earning dance gurus is in significant ways a diasporic manifestation (Yessayan 2010). The sheer number of women in this position of power is something that was unlikely in India, as male gurus dominated the market until recently.[11]

But wage-earning women and feminized men still need to be subjected to the rigors of a transnational feminist analysis, and power differentials between women must be accounted for. I have learned about unpacking power through the work of Chandra Mohanty and colleagues (1991), Margo Okazawa-Rey and Kirk (2004), and Piya Chatterjee (2001), who argue that

there can be no feminist analysis without a critique of capital.[12] Mohanty (1991) argues for a materialist analysis that simultaneously addresses issues of identity, agency, and community and calls for an examination of women's bodies that considers their materiality and not just Woman as trope, in order to fully understand how power operates.[13] A feminist and materialist analysis of American dance history must focus on the labor of poor and young women of color (here, women dancers and their practices from India, as well as feminized men) traveling in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Paying attention to the specific material concerns of women such as Sahebjan, Ruth St. Denis, and Ramya and the power differentials between them in race, class, and time allows me to consider how different dancers negotiated their movement between the informal and formal economy.

I locate colored dancing women and their stories within specific historical political economies and ask what kinds of performances, performance histories, and discourses of citizenship are produced when the analysis begins with questions of gendered labor, knowledge, power, and access. The focus on particular sociopolitical economies and material realities of Indian dancers also allows an examination of how each dancer negotiates the terms of her citizenship.

Dance and Citizenship

I inspect the intersections between labor, race, and gender in the stories of Indian dancers in the United States. Before 1965, citizenship had been elusive for most Indians. Since the nineteenth century, Indians' entrances into and exits from the United States have been controlled by fluctuating U.S. policies on immigration and citizenship. For example, many male laborers who became farmers and landowners were U.S. citizens until they were denaturalized in 1923. Indian dancers, like other Indian and Asian laborers, have toiled and sweated (in the cultural sphere), but their experiences as workers and as immigrants have not been accounted for in Asian American or American labor history.

In *Sweating Saris*, I turn to dance as an unrecognized form of labor to critique the discourses through which citizenship has been constructed. Paying attention to Indian dancers' movements to and from the United States highlights how the rules for entry into the United States are defined and redefined. Because of changing immigration laws, Indian dancers have worked in the United States under varying auspices: as aliens, temporary contract workers, H1-B workers, permanent residents, naturalized citizens, or denaturalized citizens. In examining the shifts in policies and the ensuing impacts on dancers' lives, this book suggests that citizenship is in process and is made visible by dance labor.

Certain immigration policies enacted between 1868 and 1965 were particularly relevant to Asian American labor,[14] and the dancers I encountered in the archive were shaped by these policies. I begin with the 1868 passage of the Fourteenth Amendment, which granted citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the United States. This law enabled African Americans to obtain full citizenship and opened the door to citizenship for immigrants, including Indians and other Asians. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which restricted Chinese laborers from entering the United States, led to the recruitment of Indian laborers as substitutes or competition for the Chinese laborers already in the country. Like other Indian laborers, Indian dancers benefited from this law and began entering the United States in greater numbers.

Until 1923, Indians were allowed to become citizens, but the decision in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* that year denaturalized all Asian U.S. citizens (Chan 1991, 93–94; Takaki, 1990, 299). This law culminated a long debate on the question of race and citizenship for Asians in America.[15] In 1965, the National Origins Immigration Act altered the immigration landscape for Indians again. The act gave preference to seven categories of immigrants, including laborers and those with advanced degrees. Many Asian professionals were thus able to enter the United States for the first time and apply for citizenship, and they did so in great numbers. This influx included Indian male professionals who came for work or further studies, and some came with wives who had trained as dancers in India. For *Sweating Saris*, I studied the experiences of specific artists who migrated and worked during each of these policy phases.

Historically, the research on Indian dance focuses on its contributions to cultural diversity in the United States and assumes that dance is devoid of politics. However, as Aihwa Ong (1999), Lisa Lowe (1996), May Joseph (1999), and Lok Siu (2001) argue, cultural practices can offer understandings of citizenship in both intimate and public ways, and accordingly, culture and cultural practices can intervene in political framings of citizenship. Ong and Lowe develop the notions of flexible citizenship and cultural citizenship to study the everyday practices of Asian bodies in the United States and in the diaspora.[16] Siu defines cultural citizenship as those behaviors and practices that allow an understanding of citizenship as a lived experience within uneven power structures. Although these terms describing citizenship were introduced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, I find them useful in considering the practices of transnational Indian dancers who were negotiating unfair and discriminatory terms of labor and citizenship from as early as 1880 until the present. The lived behavior of dancers, and particularly the Indian dancing body, reveals how their movements, practices,

and toil can change our understanding of the discourses of cultural and political citizenship.

For instance, although in 1881 the *nachwali* Sahebjan could not become a citizen with her contract-visa status, in performing on a New York stage, her brown body symbolically heightened white fears that citizenship could become a possibility. Her baby son, born on U.S. soil, was in fact a citizen for a short time until he died. Mogul Khan, one of Ruth St. Denis's stage performers, thought he could cement his citizenship by marrying a white American woman (St. Denis's maid), but laws preventing miscegenation rendered his marriage—and newly obtained citizenship—null and void. However, he held his citizenship for a few years at least. Indians arriving in the United States after 1965 have fared differently from those who preceded them; Indians and other Asians began to acquire a "model minority" status. In other words, they began to be—and still are—viewed as an ideal minority group that moves up economically, taking advantage of the so-called American dream. They gain green cards, become permanent residents, eventually obtain citizenship, and become cosmopolitans inhabiting multiple spaces with flexible citizenship possibilities. Indian dancers attain this ideal minority citizenship through their teaching of dance to young Indian girls (and the occasional non-Indian girl or woman), staging performances at cultural events, and working with communities during Indian festivals. They live their negotiations of "cultural citizenship" through performance as minority subjects.

On Ethnography

Sweating Saris intervenes in studies of labor, immigration, and citizenship in two ways. First, as noted, this book examines dance as unrecognized labor. Second, it offers the methodology of the unruly spectator; this spectator sees dance as labor and seeks signs and traces of the laboring dancing body. She looks for telltale signs of the body's work from the position of an ethnographer. This unruly spectator is a feminist ethnographer who simultaneously conducts an interactive auto-ethnography, an ethnography of the archive, and an ethnography of living bodies.

The methodology I use in *Sweating Saris* arose from my frustration with the ethnography I conducted in California dance classrooms in the 1990s. I increasingly questioned the social, political, and often ahistorical framework that encircled Indian dance in the United States. My love of and frustration with Indian dance drove me to find a way to write about it that made sense to me. So, the unruly spectator, a viewer who offers a nonpassive feminist perspective, was born.