



Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor

by Priya Srinivasan. 2012. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 238 pp., photographs, glossary, endnotes, references, index. \$28.95 paper.

Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South Asia

by Davesh Soneji. 2012. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. 328 pp., photographs, appendices, notes, references, index. \$24.00 paper. doi:10.1017/S0149767713000065

Two recent publications in the field of South Asian dance herald a significant shift in the landscape of dance history by arguing strongly for twenty-first century historiography to accommodate multilocal narratives of danced modernity. Both books ask for an urgent reconsideration of dances passed through the lenses of citizenship, race, and class, and suggest how such a retelling of history may deeply inform our understanding and consumption of both bygone and present-day dance practices. Although the focus on regions/geographical locations and dancing bodies is different in each book, both works examine the Indian dance form of *bharatanatyam* and excavate, through meticulous archival research, the subaltern histories of lost, marginalized, or forgotten dancers who contributed to the evolution of this form, but nevertheless slipped through the net of previous historical narratives. In so doing, these two books offer extremely valuable and original insights into the role of dancing bodies in nation-building processes and race relations.

As stated in the book's preface, Priya Srinivasan's *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* has at its core the Indian dancing body as an "unrecognized form of labor" (xi). From the very outset of the book, the image of the sweating sari (the garment worn by Indian dancers) not only acts as a powerful metonymic device, it also successfully ties together the multiple and varied histories of dancers from the Indian subcontinent and the Indian diaspora from the nineteenth century to

the present day. Srinivasan's research is groundbreaking for several reasons: first, she urges her readers to recognize the danced labor of female Indian immigrants in North America, a hitherto unacknowledged concept since most diaspora scholarship focuses on the contribution of male Indian populations to the U.S. economy. This connection between the female dancing body and immigrant labor enables Srinivasan to make astute observations on U.S. immigration policies and citizenship in the twentieth century, and to expose the startling inconsistencies within these. Second, Srinivasan offers an alternative view of U.S. canonical modern dance. Through the narratives of the *nautch* dancers who travelled to the U.S. from India beginning in the nineteenth century, and which were uncovered by exhaustive archival research, Srinivasan suggests that American early modern dance's debt to the forgotten travelling dancers from India is far greater than previously imagined. Finally, Srinivasan's method of sensitively re-imagining the past through archival traces of dancing bodies, and through her own subject position as the "unruly spectator" within this historical account, not only offers an engaging but also a deeply moving form of scholarly writing.

Parts of *Sweating Saris* may be familiar to those readers who have encountered Srinivasan's earlier research; for instance her discussion of Ruth St. Denis's interaction with the *nautch* dancers in Coney Island in 1904 (which led to the dance piece *Radha*) is well known (Srinivasan 2007). However, when read along with the stories she uncovers of male Indian dancers in St. Denis's company, relating how they straddled the precarious territory of U.S. citizenship in the early part of the twentieth century, Srinivasan clearly enables the argument for a re-examination of U.S. race relations in the early twentieth century and their connection with the emergence of modern dance. U.S. race relations and the attendant problems of marginalization of minority figures are perhaps best etched out in the book's second chapter. Here, the recovered narratives of the dancing bodies of *nautch* women such as Sahebjan and Ala Bundi clearly suggest, as Srinivasan states, that the bodies of Indian women dancers "became the nexus for commercial, textual, and political orientalism" (53). Srinivasan's research

into newspaper reviews and published public responses to the *nautch* dance performances produced by Augustin Daly in 1880s New York, reveals how the corporeality and the lack of eroticism of these artists troubled mainstream American expectations of the exotic oriental dancer. Srinivasan links the failure of these *nautch* dancers, and the public reaction to the deaths of Sahebjan's baby and Ala Bundi on American soil, to a systemic rejection within American modernism of others and otherness.

Perhaps the greatest significance of Srinivasan's excavation of historical material is that it reveals the transnational flow of bodies and ideas between the U.S. and the South Asian subcontinent from the early modern period onward, and the ways in which this transnationalism disrupts previously received definitions of twentieth-century American modernism. *Sweating Saris* not only gives voice to those subaltern figures who featured in these transnational exchanges of labor, but through its selected dancing bodies, it also offers an incisive view of the politics of ethnic categorization within wider discourses on U.S. citizenship.

Davesh Soneji's *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South Asia* is similar to Srinivasan's in its intent, in that it also prioritizes the subaltern, hidden, and forgotten histories and stories of *devadasi* dancers as they have transitioned through multiple contexts—from princely courts and temples to “salon dance” settings and villages. This history is sensitively reconstructed through rigorous and finely detailed archival and ethnographic research. The book focuses on women from South India, but the historical narrative, which spans colonial and postcolonial periods in India, carefully reveals the disjunction between an elite class of *bharatanatyam* dancers and a more subjugated class of unknown, disenfranchised trained professional dancers. Soneji's research is placed within a critical mass of previous scholarship, such as the work of Amrit Srinivasan (1985), Saskia Kersenboom-Story (1987), Avanthi Meduri (2005), and Janet O' Shea (2007), among many others. Yet he makes an immensely valuable contribution to knowledge in the field in terms of excavating new, untold archival and contemporary material of *devadasi* dancers and by exposing the realities of the communities of such women through rare in-person encounters with professional

dancers hailing from peripheral spaces in the southern Indian coastal belt.

Although Soneji's discussion in the early chapters of the colonial and postcolonial socio-economic and political context of dance in South India is fascinating, it is his attentiveness to the repertoire of women dancers in the *devadasi* community that makes this narrative both powerful and original. Soneji rightly argues that the “memory of bodily habitus, in the form of the repertoire, allows us to perceive connections between history, language, and gestures of the body that would be invisible otherwise, and are impossible to house in the archive” (16). Not only does Soneji privilege the material body of *devadasi* dancers, he also emphatically states that their art form “is not an ahistorical artifact; it is an embodied form of memory” (ibid.). This emphasis on corporeal dancing bodies that live, practice, remember, and yet constantly negotiate their marginal place in the larger social fabric of contemporary India enables this book to successfully de-exoticize *devadasi* women. By revealing the gritty underbelly of *devadasi* lives, Soneji forces his readers to notice the difficult and marginalized social position of older dancers such as Nagalakshmi and Saraswati.

In Soneji's work, the interlacing trajectories of social reform, citizenship, and the making of the modern Indian nation state in the twentieth century produce a highly complex picture—one in which the success of elite *bharatanatyam* is achieved at the expense of criminalizing the *devadasi* dancers. The state's control and management of female sexuality in the *devadasi* communities rendered certain practices, and indeed individuals, invisible and marginal. The irony of the Indian nationalist project, as revealed by Soneji, is that while social reform empowered women from certain sections of society by allowing them access to dance training, it undermined the position and agency of large numbers of professional dancers in the newly created modern nation state. *Unfinished Gestures* is a significant book not only because it points out the historical failure of colonial and nationalist social reform to enable multiple bodily practices to exist without being stigmatized, but also because it clearly exposes the state's continued apathy to alternative modalities in performance practices in contemporary India.

The opening section of this review introduced Srinivasan and Soneji's books as two recent

publications in the field of “South Asian” dance. In my conclusion, I should emphasize that these two texts are outstanding monographs, not just in the specific area of South Asian or Indian dance scholarship, but because they also produce knowledge that has far-reaching implications for the wider academic discipline of dance research. Srinivasan and Soneji’s detailed archival work and analyses offer a fresh perspective on the past, and also suggest new possibilities and directions for research on dance through the lenses of citizenship, immigration, belonging, and embodied memory. Both demand that dance’s past be reread in order for its present-day practice to be rediscovered. Their interventions in historiography are timely, necessary, and invaluable.

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The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance: Identity, Performance, and Understanding

by Graham McFee. 2011. Binsted, Hampshire, UK: Dance Books Ltd. xvii + 342 pp., appendix, bibliography, notes, index. \$34.95 paper. doi:10.1017/S0149767713000077

Graham McFee is one of the few philosophers who can be credited with helping to pioneer and forge a

path for dance as a fine art in the field of analytic aesthetics.¹ His 1992 book, *Understanding Dance*, following Francis Sparshott’s 1988 book, *Off the Ground: First Steps to a Philosophical Consideration of the Dance*, was a significant introductory step toward situating dance in a field that has traditionally focused primarily and nearly exclusively on painting, sculpture, literature, and (more recently) music.² In general, dance has not been taken seriously as a legitimate art form by the philosophic academy; indeed, it was originally excluded from Hegel’s system of the fine arts (see Sparshott 1983). Analytic aesthetics has yet to fully recover from this historical exclusion. The articles and books on dance in the field have been sporadic, often *ad hoc*, and dance has yet to attract enough scholars of analytic aesthetics to sustain a robust dialogue on what counts (or should count) as the key features of dance as art.

In light of this background, it comes as no surprise that *The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance*, McFee’s follow-up to and extension of *Understanding Dance*, draws heavily on the larger body of rigorous literature that exists in the analytic aesthetics of both the concept of art in general and on music, the art that is perhaps closest to dance given its performative, non-clearly-text-based, and often abstract nature. Although he avoids one traditional focus of analytic aesthetics by refusing to provide a definition of dance as art, eschewing the philosophical practice of constructing definitions that requires dance to be defined in terms of its necessary and sufficient conditions (those conditions without which dance could not be what it is and that distinguish dance from all other forms of art), his book does cover a large portion of the other categories under which art is discussed analytically (see 270). Its strengths for analytic aesthetics lie in his detailed and in-depth discussions of what should count as a dance “work” of art (what McFee calls a “dancework”) for purposes of numerical identification, appreciation, and historical preservation. Particularly helpful is his discussion of how a dancework should be construed as (1) neither “autographic” nor “allographic” under Nelson Goodman’s categories in *Languages of Art*, but a performable and re-performable artwork with a certain history of production (see Part One); (2) an abstract, structural “type” for which subsequent performances are “tokens” (see Part One, Part