Title: Book Review – Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor by Priya Srinivasan.
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Srinivasan performs a materialist reading of *bharatnatyam* as a world dance practice. The labor of the dancing body manifests as the sweating sari. *Sweating Saris* centers labor and materiality of the Indian female body and designs a vivid ethnography of the transnational mobility regarding bodies, memories, labor, and practices. The author makes legible “subjugated knowledges,” socio-political relevance, and corporeal materiality in the rubrics of power, transnational labor and performance regarding *bharatnatyam*. “The illusion that the dance is effortless is undone through the bodily juices seeping and creeping onto the sari, and the sari becomes part of the Indian dancing body.” (xi) *Sweating Saris* fills the perceptual gap between unacknowledged labor and the dance product that inhabits global stages; it “illustrate[s] how subaltrerns can move elusively through modes of representation and occupy different subject positions within a spectrum, embodying various roles.” (10) The book relays a deeply reflexive, deeply scholarly and articulately performative ethnographic endeavor. The author’s critique navigates Hindu, Euro-Western, and Orientalist paradigms in her critique in a way that not only aides the materialist project, but *performs*, unperturbed, a counter-epistemology and lived ontology. The book deploys Vedanta-inspired non-dualism (28) with tones of third world feminist ethnography.

Srinivasan’s analysis goes beyond body schema of Marxist (body as labor/class) and poststructuralist (body as sign/subject) persuasion. The author deploys the Dance Studies and Performance Studies lens in which body itself produces (critical) discourse through practice – which is also product. Through ethnographic methodology, *Sweating Saris* makes legible (and vital) bodies that are absent or invisible to the current archive of ethnography such as under-caste *devadasis* and *mahari*. (150) Ramya Harishankar, for instance, takes center in the sixth chapter, as a first generation, migrant, guru of *bharatnatyam*, and the author’s long time acquaintance. As participant in the Srinivasan’s ethnography, Harishankar’s practice, performance and pedagogy bolsters the above project. Srinivasan deconstructs *bharatnatyam* technique, deploys
choreographic analysis with her ethnography. The artform is revealed as an arduous vocation in which the body is disciplined, cultured and conditioned. The technique is precise, mimetic and deeply rooted in story. The book brings attention to how the corporeality of the dancing body is politically and culturally material. The reader “sees” gurus, students, the observer, and the audience through the lucid perspective of the author.

Anti-Asian immigration laws of the United States unearths the plight and resiliency of both the female and male Indian. Srinivasan is unperturbed in identifying key political processes and factors that relegated the Asian immigrant and “minority” an abject subjectivity as it were. Orientalism and United States immigration laws are considered relationally as to navigate the (ethno)histories and global mobilities through stories of dancing Indian women in the United States. The writer furnishes an Asian-centered interrogation of the history of United States immigration policy as early as first recorded Indian dance performance in 1880, the Alien Contract Labor Law of 1885, and the Indian Immigration Law of 1917. Sweating Saris considers the workings of racialization, migration and citizenship of Asian American’s, and how it facilitated the transplanting of bharatnatyam to the U.S., yet restored sexualized/gendered trends of these immigration policies which Srinivasan argues are linked to orientalism. (56)

The narrative relays the pre-colonial-to ancient practices within the originary religious context of the form, then the later ejection and erasure of the more carnal, less ideal temple dancer. The form was re-conceived to the more Victorian taste of the Indian upper-class and Indophiles in accordance with the needs of the national culture project: the production of an ideal Indian subjectivity. We go on to learn of the earliest recorded Indian dancers (43-44) in the United States and onwards to the author’s scholarly immersion California’s bharatnatyam scene. Sweating Saris highlights how assimilation and appropriation serve to create and define national and cultural bodies such as the ideal Indian woman as cultural citizen. (140) The author also explores the rhetoric of modernity and other processes by which 1940’s American Modern dance exceptionalized itself produce a separate ‘ethnic dance’ category. This is done through overwriting history to correct erasures that are all too familiar in dance histories such as the legacy of Ruth St. Denis expounded in the third and fourth chapters. Srinivasan conducts and “ambivalent” reading of the biography and auto-biography of St. Denis (68), and employs a gendered body discourse to interrogate technologies of Orientalism from early to mid-nineteen hundreds America. Srinivasan paints a new legibility for the Indian female dancing subject from
ethnohistories to global mobilities. *Sweating Saris* allows legibility of an Asian transglobal subjectivity, of a kinesthetic archive and of the dance scholarship. As a practitioner of the form, her unruly spectator is in a unique position to inform the reader.

Srinivasan uses the unruly spectator well especially in distinguishing the objective and the subjective while acknowledging how they are not separate. (119) The persona allows, assumes and deploys and intersectionality of embodied textuality that much scholarship struggles with. This spectator is engaged in, and knowledgeable on, the tradition and its materiality, she is attentive to labor and critical of the processes accompanying the form. I appreciate that *Sweating Saris* does not replicate the production of “difference” that is nearly inescapable ethnographic scholarship. It does not restore “the danger of the single story” while it compounds the endeavors toward counter-epistemologies or over-writing history; endeavors which still have much further to go than making legible or re-writing body-archives. Still, *Sweating Saris* gestures toward sameness in other histories that have been overwhelmed by ‘the single story’ and *Sweating Saris* confronts erasures with the full momentum of multiple voices to the gravity of a particular lived ontology.

Though some may fail to appreciate the embodied research approach, *Sweating Saris* serves those in dance and performance scholarship, embodied practice, humanistic fields and even suggests possibilities for practice-based research. For dance studies it furthers the efforts to understand dance through subjectivity, race, gender, class, and breaking some altars that erase bodies through myths of modernity through dexterous ethnohistoric investigation. Srinivasan reveals not only the labor of the dancing body as global commodity, but also the labor that goes into creating identity at personal and societal levels. By bringing attention to the materiality of the dancing body, Srinivasan achieves a performative ethnography that troubles epistemic hegemonies and normative valuations of lived experience. *Sweating Saris* corrects erasures in the archive and gestures toward counter epistemologies. The work diverges uniquely and effectively in ethnographic scholarship.