

The Dancer's Voice

PERFORMANCE AND
WOMANHOOD IN
TRANSNATIONAL INDIA

RUMYA SREE PUTCHA



The
Dancer's
Voice

BUY

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DUKE

Duke University Press *Durham and London* 2023

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Courtney Leigh Richardson

Typeset in Merope by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Putcha, Rumya Sree, [date] author.

Title: The dancer's voice : performance and womanhood in transnational India / Rumya Sree Putcha.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2022. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022006094 (print) |

LCCN 2022006095 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478016496 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478019138 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478023760 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Dance—Social aspects—India. | Feminism and

dance—India. | Feminism—India. | Women dancers—India. |

Women in the performing arts—India. | Women—India—Social

conditions. | BISAC: SOCIAL SCIENCE / Feminism & Feminist

Theory | PERFORMING ARTS / Dance / Regional & Ethnic

Classification: LCC GV1693 .P883 2022 (print) |

LCC GV1693 (ebook) | DDC 792.8/0954—dc23/eng/20220527

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022006094>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022006095>

COVER ART: Vasanta Lakshmi Putcha, author's mother, 1955,
aged nine.

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For my parents

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The goal is to get into that state where the dancer and the dance become one. Where, if you're sitting in the audience, you see through her, past her. Where she disappears, and all you can see is the dance. — RAMA VAIDYANATHAN

If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive. — AUDRE LORDE, "Learning from the 60s"

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND LANGUAGE

For Indian-language words (Telugu, Tamil, Hindi, and Sanskrit), I have followed the Library of Congress system of transliteration and diacritics. For the sake of ease and clarity, I use diacritical markings only when I introduce a term. I have included all transliterations with diacritical markings in the glossary. Exceptions to this include proper names of individuals and places as well as titles of dances, musical pieces, literary works, and films, which are transliterated according to common practice.

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PROLOGUE

It would not be an overstatement to say that this book is based on over thirty years of reflection, thought, and action. The questions that are posed and, in some cases, answered in the pages that follow began for me many, many years ago, in a Hindu temple in Pearland, Texas, on a sweltering October afternoon in 1986. On that day, with a great deal of sentimentality, my parents presented me to two south Indian immigrant women, one a Tamil *karnāṭak* singer and the other a Telugu *bharatanatyam* and *kuchipudi* dancer, to begin my training in music and dance.¹ In a gendered act of religious identification, I was initiated into the Indian performance arts. I was shown how to hold my hands in mudras, turn my feet out and hit them on the hard, white linoleum, and sing a series of ascending notes: sa re ga ma pa da ni sa.

The photo in figure P.1 shows me on that day in 1986, in a pose that repeats throughout family photo albums: dancing for the camera but looking at my mom or my guru, who are directing the picture, if not the performance itself. It's striking to me now that there aren't many pictures of the singing portion of my young life, considering each activity was designated an hour's worth of lesson time each Saturday morning. It's the dance photos that made their way into family stories and then affirmed my identification as an Indian woman in the United States. The costumes, the jewelry, the extra-“Hindu-ness” that a dancer performs all make for better photos, I suppose.² In retrospect, it is clear that

FIGURE P.1.
First dance
lesson, October
1986.



dancing led to an acute sense of *becoming* an Indian woman in ways that singing simply did not for me.

Looking back, I can pinpoint when I decided, definitively, that *karnatak* vocal music was not for me. I was eleven years old, and Disney's *Aladdin* had just been released. *Aladdin* represented a turning point, inasmuch as I would spend the next decade of my life with the nickname Jasmine, inspired by the rebel-princess in the film. Her character played an important role in reflecting an exotic femininity for Indian women like me, all while conveying the message that daughters must marry—that was the ultimate goal. Jasmine's influence on my life, however, while meaningful for the gender, sexual, and racial identity she reflected, was something far greater. In that film, though Jasmine's body is oth-

ered, her voice is not.³ It was a shock for me to hear her sing.⁴ It was an even greater shock to see my white friends accept and even admire Jasmine, even if she was a cartoon, because of her voice.

In light of this revelation, in the sixth grade I quietly taught myself “A Whole New World,” the duet Jasmine sings with her love interest in the film, *Aladdin*. Though I was a violist in the orchestra, a kind junior high choir director, Ms. McLeod, indulged me one day after school when I wandered in from across the hall and let me sing it for her. Realizing I had vocal training (she admitted to me years later that she desperately needed more altos), she moved to the piano and led me through a few vocal exercises, taking me down to notes I knew how to access with my *karnatic* training, which relied on what singers refer to as “chest voice.” But she also vocalized me up to notes I had never touched in my *karnatic* training. As I climbed those scales, she pressed my abdomen with her hand, forcing me to brace my abdominal muscles—something I knew how to do from my dance training. In that moment I felt a sound ringing from my body I had never felt in my years of *karnatic* training. While *karnatic* music, as a seated practice, felt restricted, even disconnected from my body, this sound felt thrilling, powerful, and uncensored.

As I discovered my racial difference through choral music in the suburbs of Houston, my dance training proceeded with its own juggernaut momentum. My mother and dance teacher had been laying plans for a grand debut solo performance in *bharatanatyam*, known as an *arangetram*, perhaps since before I was even able to walk.⁵ Their planning came to fruition on November 23, 1991, shortly after my tenth birthday, when after months of rehearsals three to four hours a day, I performed a two-hour solo recital—a feat to demonstrate my endurance, mastery, and skill. The *arangetram* was an intense experience and one that reflects how much my bodily labor as a public performer mattered to my parents and my predominantly Telugu Brahmin community.⁶ I remember the way my ankle bells would cut into my feet and how my grandmother sewed blue velvet onto them so the abrasions wouldn’t get worse. My most vivid memory of the event is from the aftermath. While Duran Duran’s “Ordinary World” played on the radio in the background, I was alone in my parents’ bedroom. Left to entertain myself, I opened a gift my mother’s boss had given me to mark the occasion: a black and gold box containing the most beautiful ruby earrings I had ever seen.⁷

At the same juncture in my life, as I learned how meaningful my dancerly abilities were to the Indian immigrant elders around me as well as their majority-white employers and colleagues, I became more viscerally aware of the deep and abiding anti-immigrant forms of racism that permeate US American

FIGURE P.2.
Performing
bharatanatyam at
a NASA-JSC event,
1989.



life. Henna tattoos are common today, but in 1991, I faced constant ridicule and shame at the red stains on my hands from dance performances (see figure P.2). And so, I did everything in my power to hide my dance life during the day at school for fear of being bullied by students like the one who told me on a bus ride home that his uncle was a grand wizard in the Ku Klux Klan, and people like me were not welcome in their communities. Looking back now, it makes sense that I found some belonging and safety in choir. It was a group activity; I could be anonymous, doing something I already knew how to do. In other words, joining the choir was an excellent way to assimilate in my predominantly white Texas public school. But singing in a choir meant, more often than not, singing music rooted in the Christian faith. Though they eventually made their peace with it, for the decades to follow, up to and including my part-time jobs as a professional soprano in church settings, my parents didn't know what to make of my dual identity as a Hindu dancer and a Christian singer.

Paradoxes aside, my story is not unique. I grew up, like so many other Indian American women whose dominant-caste families turned dance into a type of religious edification and finishing school, caught between two worlds, doing my best to accommodate the expectations of both.⁸ I became an expert in code switching. That is to say, I internalized the messages I received from Indian immigrants, other racial minorities, and white US Americans and learned the art of looking Indian and sounding white.

In college at the University of Chicago in 2001, I met a professor who introduced me to the idea of subculture—a revelation to me at the time—which seemed to capture my experience growing up middle class, racialized as other, but not black, and among immigrants. His name was George Chauncey, and under his supervision I wrote an undergraduate thesis titled “Beyond the Stage: Culture, Identity, and Dance in Indian America.” In reconstructing the sequence of events that brought me to writing this prologue, I went looking for his comments on the thesis and found these words in the official feedback form from the Department of History: “You argue persuasively that parents use dance to instill in their daughters a deeper appreciation of Indian culture and, indeed, to encourage them to ‘embody’ some of its characteristic moral and bodily postures. Although the paper offers several interesting general characterizations of the history of this cultural practice, it would have been strengthened if you had explored the historical development of the practice more fully and in developing your own argument.”

It has taken me years to produce an account that could begin to follow this advice. It is difficult to see oneself within a history as that history is unfolding, even more elusive to develop a vocabulary that somehow pushes the existing narrative to some new revelation that could adequately explain the very situation in which I found myself—the first generation born and raised in the United States to immigrants who had been allowed in only because of the struggles for racial justice and the shifting political landscape of the post–World War II era. It was only much, much later that I began to understand that the white violence I encountered as a model minority in the late twentieth century was nothing like that experienced by my parents, who were born into English-educated Telugu Brahmin families at the same moment India gained independence from the British.⁹ I learned, through my parents’ silence about the racism they experienced as well as the caste privilege and antiblackness from which they benefited, that racial consciousness is not only about seeing yourself, like looking in a mirror, but also about seeing what others see when they look at you.

This awareness of how racism and casteism intersect with the entrenched legacies of European colonialism in the US context became clearer for me when

I was admitted to a doctoral program in 2004. Because the University of Chicago has a fairly tight-knit humanities community, not long after I graduated, my bachelor's thesis somehow found its way into the hands of a British anthropologist who studied Middle Eastern music. He told me about a discipline called ethnomusicology over coffee one day in his home. Sitting in his living room, surrounded by instruments and artwork from all over the world, I learned about a field dedicated to studying the expressive cultures of previously colonized, nonwhite, or non-Western people — people like me. After completing an undergraduate degree in music, which focused exclusively on European art music, this information felt like magic.

Yet, as I write these words today, almost a decade after completing my formal education, I am aware of the principled reasons why scholars like me part company with ethnomusicology — through attentiveness to what Deborah Wong (2001) once characterized as the “problem of listening,” a phrase emphasizing how majority scholars often fail to heed minoritized perspectives, even when other scholars take the time to formulate and transmit them. This book upbraids problematic listeners and is a product of my working through the historical, political, and at times deeply personal questions that animate research in the North American academy on Indian women's lives and choices. Though I join a long list of scholars who have undertaken similar projects from various subject positions (see, e.g., Gaunt 2006; Jackson 2006; Loza 2006), I am increasingly aware of how empire, migration, and feminism inform my approach as a Telugu Brahmin woman and an Indian American, born and raised by immigrants in Texas, and positioned in a US university. In many ways, this book and its methods recall Salman Rushdie's reflections on the incompleteness of postcolonial and immigrant subjectivity: “It may be that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost” (1992, 11).¹⁰

Acknowledging the shifting power structures and broken mirrors that form the foundation of my work and access, this book engages with a specific feminist impulse — undertaking what Audre Lorde (1977) and Sylvia Wynter (2003) have variously described as “disruption” and “epistemic disobedience.” This book is being completed at a moment when I am able to recognize a winding road of liberation consciousness in retrospect, but am increasingly aware of how institutions of higher education have relegated such political projects within their ranks to the rhetoric of multiculturalism or diversity. This discourse tends to bracket radical work, especially that which resists and refuses the disciplining

and assimilating of disabled, racialized, or gendered difference as something done “out there” rather than “in here.” In the end, this book challenges the divisions of here and there, then and now, and body and voice in an attempt to gather together and make whole these various fragments of my scholarship, activism, and life.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2013, a twenty-three-year-old Indian American woman, Nina Davuluri, a classically trained south Indian dancer, was crowned Miss America.¹ Davuluri's family had immigrated from the Telugu-speaking region of southeast India to the United States after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act.² Though she identified as a *kuchipudi* and *bharatanatyam* dancer throughout the pageant, Davuluri did not present a classical item during the talent portion of the event, but rather translated her dance skills into a high-energy athletic performance, which combined movements and sounds that have entered the US multicultural landscape through Bollywood cinema.³ Her costume also departed from the conventions of classical dance and drew instead on fashion from popular Indian cinema and bridal wear. Despite her success during both the talent and interview portions — she was especially commended for her “articulateness” — for days after the event, social media platforms bore witness to displeasure that an Indian immigrant could reflect American beauty. On Twitter especially, users referred to Davuluri as “Miss Al-Qaeda” or “Miss 7–11,” with one user observing, “Egypt dancing? This is America” (see Broderick 2013). From India, commentators noted the irony that a “dark-skinned Kamma girl” could represent Indian beauty.⁴

A year earlier, a twenty-three-year-old Indian woman was sexually assaulted in New Delhi. In the aftermath of the crime, debate, protest, and commentary

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erupted across the world about India's regressive attitudes toward women who dared venture out in public. For months, British, North American, and Indian media outlets as well as academic documentary filmmakers rehearsed the gory details of the attack, using a pseudonym, Nirbhaya (trans. fearless), in place of the victim's real name, Jyoti Singh Pandey. The coverage of the crime could best be described as cinematic—highlighting not only the brutality of the assault and the fact that the assailants were members of a much-maligned population of migrant laborers but also that it happened to a beautiful, yet-to-be-married young woman, a call center employee who was on her way home after going out to see a movie with a friend. In India, activists demanded that the government acknowledge that crimes against women, especially rural and Dalit (oppressed caste) women, occurred at far higher rates with far less public outcry. They asked, “Why was this particular woman's body worthier of national bereavement than others? Why would the media and the academy amplify her parents' demands for justice, but not the voices of oppressed-caste or transgender women?”

This book is about how stories like Nina Davuluri's and Jyoti Singh Pandey's have come to characterize experiences of Indian womanhood around the world. I interrogate the media-driven, narrating forces that position these two women as instructive examples of Indian womanhood—while simultaneously suggesting that they are exceptional characters—to uncover the complex and often contradictory ways Indian women exist in this world. Where Davuluri emerges as an aspirational example of Indian American womanhood when she dances to a Bollywood film song, appealing to the standard quotient of the white male gaze—beauty—Pandey appears as a cautionary tale of Indian womanhood and only in death, as nothing more than a victim. In both cases, in spite of, or perhaps precisely because of, their hypervisible bodies, it became possible for many to speak on behalf of or in place of these women. In other words, the more visible each woman's body became, the less her voice remained her own.

Separating women's voices from their bodies has been central to the practices of national citizenship since at least the early twentieth century. By national citizenship, I mean the relationship between an individual and a nation-state. In this relationship, an individual—a citizen—has access to certain rights and privileges in exchange for their allegiance. While allegiance can denote private and emotional attachments, allegiance is often expressed in public, ritual acts; for example, when a person places their hand over their heart during the national anthem. Ritual expressions of allegiance, as both bodily and public acts, require one to understand citizenship and its practices as a performance. In this book, I explore how such performances shape the way women, specifically those who understand themselves as Indian women, experience citizenship as

a gendered and racialized practice. In other words, I demonstrate how citizenship for Indian women relies on their performance as both Indian *and* women.

My argument rests on the premise that the public persona of the Indian dancer symbolically represents and reinforces how citizenship for women operates as a public act. Bringing together examples of Indian and Indian American dancers from the 1930s to the contemporary moment, I expose how the logics of citizenship have required and continue to require Indian women's voices to be managed in public cultures. And I show how some women have subverted such regimes of control. For example, in an interview with English-language media aired shortly after she was crowned, Davuluri was asked to respond to the racist backlash. Instead of capitulating to the anti-immigrant sentiments that her fame and success had inspired, however, Davuluri redirected in her response, reminding her audience, "I have always viewed myself as first and foremost American" (see Morawetz 2013).

In this book, I highlight how the dancer's voice reveals quiet strategies of resistance and subversive acts of compliance. To better explain how such strategies both link and delink performance and subjectivity, and to reduce the potential risk of producing scholarship that speaks for or on behalf of others, I include my ethnographic voice, interrogating family memories and my own dance training alongside the archival and observational. Likewise, I bring together cinema dance and classical dance cultures, treating them as coconstituted. By widening my frame in these ways, I am better able to contextualize how a Telugu immigrant woman trained in *bharatanatyam* and *kuchipudi* danced to a Bollywood song to win a beauty pageant in the United States.

I begin in the early era of Telugu sound film to uncover how the dancer's voice has evolved, highlighting how a constellation of social forces such as anticolonialism, nationalism, and migration have at once amplified and ventriloquized her. In each chapter, I listen for how a dancer's voice is managed, examining the slippage between her subjectivity and the role that she performs. For example, in chapter 1 I follow the voice of an early Telugu film dancer-singer, Sundaramma, through the film archive, bringing cinematic historicity into conversation with the training offered in institutional *kuchipudi* dance centers. In subsequent chapters, I rely on a variety of cultural artifacts extending from the film archive, like radio cultures and songbooks, language politics, costuming and choreography, and advertising cultures, in each case offering ethnographic texture to the dancer's performance by and through her voice.

Relying on a reflexive, transnational feminist method, which recognizes the divergent ways bodies and voices are able to access citizenship, I examine the settings in which Indian women are or are not free to express their subjectivi-

ties. This approach exposes the unstable distinction between women like Pandey and Davuluri, between victims and heroines, and illuminates how such binary constructions have affected the lived experiences of Indian women over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In particular, I focus on how performances of Indian womanhood—public expressions of citizenship—have relied upon, recycled, and, in some cases, subverted the victim-heroine dynamic and in doing so have animated what it means to identify as an Indian woman.

Performance

As Nina Davuluri's reliance on Bollywood performance demonstrates, South Asian publics and cinema are mutually constituted. Cinema and its logics of performance do not exist in a separate realm from everyday life. In fact, public representations of womanhood are deeply embedded in the lives of Indian women and their understandings of self. My intervention both builds upon and departs from a large body of feminist work that has examined gender as a woman's problem, circumscribed and validated by positivist and legal categories of sexuality, criminality, and marriage. Much of this work has grappled with the disciplinary and evidentiary limitations imposed by colonial thought and its materialist, archival, and discursive impulses.⁵ It is primarily under the logics of colonial modernity, for example, that Indian women's bodies became a metric for studying sexuality and, simultaneously, for exerting control over women's lives.⁶ Through analysis, women's bodies became and remain simultaneously silent and hyper-visible, variously glossed in the discourse as prostitutes, public entertainers, *devadāsīs*, or courtesans. Research often positioned as postcolonial or subaltern has endeavored to recuperate and amplify the voices of Indian women, especially those women whose expressive cultural practices many scholars have regarded as representative of India beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth.⁷ In this way, Indian womanhood has operated and continues to operate as an epistemological horizon, perceived in and through moments when body and voice are understood as distinct planes of subjectivity.

In this book, I complicate the essentialized epistemologies that separate the noncitizen from the citizen, the public from the private, and the voice from the body.⁸ I use the term *performance* to capture the dynamic processes, complexity, and internal contradictions of cultural practices that pivot around the rituals of Indian womanhood. I trace how and why Indian womanhood is performed as citizenship, oscillating between India and the United States and between film,

archival, and ethnographic analysis, toggling between the past and the present to locate individual women and highlight how they express their unique subjectivities. This allows me to bring critical archival and ethnographic work conducted in India (Chennai, Hyderabad, Pune, Bangalore, New Delhi) as well as in the United States (Houston, San Francisco, Chicago) from 2004 to 2019 into conversation with my own migration and family history. By locating myself and my access in this way, I am able to engage with a more capacious understanding of what performance is and does.

In so doing, I position myself alongside a number of both recent and well-rehearsed critiques emerging from South Asian performance studies and Asian American critical race and feminist studies (see, e.g., Gopinath 2005; Prasad 2017) to establish a simple truth: that “performance means never for the first time. It means: for the second to the *n*th time. Performance is ‘twice-behaved behavior’” (Schechner [1985] 2011, 36–37). I focus on the deep and mutually constitutive connections between “twice-behaved behavior,” public cultures, and citizenship for Indian women over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Specifically, I uncover how the figure of the Indian dancer has, on the one hand, produced twice-behaved behavior for generations of women under the logics of cis-heteropatriarchy and how, on the other, such behavior relies on racialized and dissociative understandings of the body and voice.

A truism: Indian dancers—whether they are in India or not—are positioned as ambassadors for a cisgender and heterosexual Indian womanhood and are expected to speak English (see also Chandra 2012). This paradoxical yet stabilized understanding of what the Indian dancer means, in voice as well as in body, suggests that she, as a symbol, must be understood as a symptom of a much longer, if discontinuous, history of Indian womanhood extending before and after the colonial era, both in India and elsewhere (see also Srinivasan 2012, 8).

I stumbled across the photo in figure I.1 in the summer of 2006. It was the summer of my comprehensive exams at the University of Chicago, and, on that day, I had decided to take a break and spend some time on the first floor of the Regenstein Library in the popular periodical section. As I walked past the newspapers and scanned for something that might count as light reading, I caught sight of a woman’s face, in the iconic makeup and temple jewelry of a south Indian classical dancer.⁹ The image captured a racialized logic I knew all too well—an Indian American woman whose identity was defined by the idea that while she looked like a timeless temple dancer, she was expected to be adept at

FIGURE I.1.
Time magazine
 cover, June 2006.



communicating in the languages of consumerism—English and modern technology (see also Radhakrishnan 2008, 7–8).

The Indian dancer is a simultaneously sonic and visual figure.¹⁰ To perceive the dancer as an icon in sight or sound, or sight before or after sound, not only misrecognizes the complex negotiations dancers are required to make in relation to sound, but also suggests that they are nothing more than bodies reacting to that which is always already external to their performance. For example, the expectation implicit in figure I.1—that the dancer functions as a translator by way of her mediated voice—recalls a familiar, if facile, dichotomy for those who study postcolonial nationalism and its discourses of citizenship: looking traditional while sounding and in this case utilizing the modern (i.e., the headset). Departing from this binary, I offer, instead, a transnational feminist critique to expose a parallel, coconstituted politics of performance, which both reifies and fetishizes the dancer's body and requires her voice to translate and assimilate.

Transnationalism captures the juxtaposed identifications of body and voice that the Indian dancer conveys. Specifically, transnationalism draws attention to the processes through which immigrant bodies and voices are differentiated. Such processes of differentiation reveal how dancers understand themselves as transnational citizens rather than diasporic subjects.¹¹ Positioning myself alongside research that has theorized transnationalism as a way to understand how (im)migrants since at least the beginning of the twentieth century maintained connections to their national place of origin through social behaviors (Faist 2000; Vertovec 2001), I interrogate how the disjuncture between body and voice is normalized and reproduced. I argue that the logics of transnationalism encourage a sense of “both here and there,” which often can and does require the voice to assimilate in ways that are distinct from the body (Vertovec 2001, 575).

In the US context, transnationalism celebrates and silences othered bodies through the policies of multiculturalism, which require the management of racial difference, particularly through language and speech (see also Rosa 2019). The social forces that sever and then reconnect an Indian woman’s voice to a body in the United States in the post-1965 Immigration Act era both demonstrate the limits of multiculturalism and reveal the corporeal and materialist logics of race and assimilation in transnational communities.¹² The Indian dancer’s nonblack gendered identity combined with the expectation that she (like most Indians) speaks English aids in her assimilation and legibility in some spaces while it hinders it in others.¹³

In cases like mine, the racial identifications that extended from a choir membership in Houston, Texas, left few options except to identify as white.¹⁴ These sorts of identifications can and often did lead to broader social and political affinities. For example, because my social world at school was shaped by this activity, most of my friends belonged to white, conservative, and Christian households. As one may or may not expect in Texas, these young men and women listened to country music, almost exclusively. For example, the very first US American country song I learned word for word in seventh grade was Reba McEntire’s (1990) “Fancy,” a song about an impoverished white girl groomed into sex work by her own mother.

We didn’t have money for food or rent
to say the least we were hard pressed.
And mama spent every last penny we had

to buy me a dancing dress.
Mama washed and combed and curled my hair
and then she painted my eyes and lips.

I remember the day my classmates taught me these lyrics. Looking around that sprawling, beautifully appointed suburban Houston home, I was bewildered at the idea that young well-to-do white women identified with this song—that they somehow aspired to a life of singing, dancing, and sex work. In the years since, this memory has led to reflection and consideration: what did my ability to join this group of young white women and sing along signal about my access and the uninterrogated task of assimilating in their world? And what might this line of inquiry expose about the dynamic and transnational formations of Indian womanhood that have simultaneously differentiated the dancer from and connected her to her voice?

To answer these questions and more adequately explain how some Indian women identify themselves in the early twenty-first century requires a political and methodological distinction between transnational immigrations and diasporic racial formations. I situate myself, for example, as an Indian and a South Asian, in terms of my racial identification in the United States, and a transnational immigrant inasmuch as my migration history is relatively uncomplicated, privileged, and recent. My parents' immigration and thus my own relied upon well-established forms of labor-specific migration. These forms of migration to the United States, which are a direct result of the 1965 Immigration Act, welcomed immigrants as well as their families, particularly from dominant-caste and Telugu-speaking communities, to work in fields such as science and technology (see Roohi 2017, 2018; Quraishi 2020).¹⁵

It is primarily these post-1965 Act immigrant families who have reproduced India, and arguably the whole of South Asia, as Hindu-centric in the United States. However, despite the common application of the qualifier *diasporic* to describe Indian communities anywhere outside India, Indian immigrant families in the United States rarely identify with definitions of Indian diaspora that acknowledge migration patterns rooted in imperial violence, racism, and caste discrimination (see also Gidla 2017; Subramanian 2019). This is because to do so would be to identify with Indians who were forced to leave India as indentured servants, Indians whose connection to the subcontinent was often severed by the dehumanizing conditions on plantations in the Indian Ocean (see Ahuja 2002; Anderson 2000; Bates 2017), the Caribbean (see Bahadur 2013), and the South Pacific (see Lal 1985) or in eastern regions of Africa, where their labor built the railroad between Kenya and Uganda (see Desai and Vahed 2010). These

were the diasporic Indians as well as Chinese who, in British colonies from 1834, and in the French and Dutch colonies who modeled their systems on the British into the twentieth century, replaced previously enslaved Africans on plantations under what Hugh Tinker once described as “a new system of slavery.”¹⁶ And as Gaiutra Bahadur has noted in her work, it was the system of “indenture . . . [that] distinguished Indian from Chinese women. The latter women were required to live on plantations, but weren’t bound by contract to work on them. Unexposed to the glare of sun and suitors in cane fields, most Chinese women led lives more protected and more restricted than their Indian counterparts did” (2013, 117). In other words, under empire, Indian women emerged as a different, more public category of a racialized womanhood (see also Datta 2021).

As early as 1790, US immigration policy toward Indians followed racial and gender logics established by the British Empire.¹⁷ By the nineteenth century, immigrants from India to the United States were mostly men—British soldiers, servants, or sailors working for the East India trading company.¹⁸ In the twentieth century, this group consisted primarily of Sikh men originating from the region of Punjab and was concentrated on the Pacific Coast, where they worked as manual or “unskilled” laborers in lumber yards, agricultural development, or building the railroads.¹⁹ After decades of mounting anti-immigrant sentiment, in 1917 the US government passed the first in a series of immigration acts to limit migration from a geographically defined region that came to be known as the Asiatic Barred Zone.²⁰ Besides defining race by geography, this act included language around the kinds of labor or skills that would allow one entry to the United States. This law was the first to prohibit short-term, manual, or “contract labor” and instead privileged those “professionals” with formal education or “skills” that were otherwise underrepresented: “That skilled labor, if otherwise admissible, may be imported if labor of like kind unemployed cannot be found in this country. . . . That the provisions of this law applicable to contract labor shall not be held to exclude professional actors, artists, lecturers, singers, nurses, ministers of any religious denomination, professors for colleges or seminaries, persons belonging to any recognized learned profession, or persons employed as domestic servants.” Beyond the careful parsing of which skills—artist and actor separate from singer—were considered desirable or not, this law also came to be known as the Literacy Act since it included language about literacy: “The following persons shall also be excluded from admission thereto: ‘All aliens over sixteen years of age, physically capable of reading, who cannot read the English language, or some other language or dialect, including Hebrew or Yiddish. . . . Each alien may designate the particular language or dialect in which he desires the examination to be made and shall be required to read the words

printed on the slip in such language or dialect.” This act set a precedent by naming literacy as well as artistic ability as desirable, that is, by creating a category of model immigrants through the law.

Simultaneously, the act solidified a racial category of Asian in the United States that would endure through the subsequent immigration acts of 1924 and 1952.²¹ These categories shifted in 1965.²² The 1965 Immigration Act, which belonged to a larger body of civil rights legislation, went into effect in 1968 as the Cold War deepened and the space race gained momentum. This new act welcomed migrants to the United States who were “members of the professions, or who because of their exceptional ability in the sciences or the arts will substantially benefit prospectively the national economy, cultural interests, or welfare of the United States.” The act defined “profession” as including, but not “limited to, architects, engineers, lawyers, physicians, surgeons, and teachers in elementary or secondary schools, colleges, academies, or seminaries.”²³ Put another way, the body of legislation on immigration that was passed over the course of the twentieth century in the United States linked artistry as well as literacy to skilled labor or profession—a shorthand for a formal education or white-collar work—as requirements for immigrants from India and the area understood as Asia more generally.²⁴

Thus, for the generation of Indians who migrated to the United States by way of the 1965 Act, migration was seen and described as an active choice of leaving India for the United States, equipped with specific skills and with a high likelihood that their families would be able to join them. In other words, celebratory representations of why Indians left India in the late twentieth century not only paper over the long legal history of anti-Asian sentiment that preceded this era but also, as the Australian comedian Aamer Rahman (2013) astutely observed, completely ignore how colonialism instituted Eurocentric hegemonies, training “black and brown people to think that they [should] *want* to leave India and live where white people come from.”²⁵ It is in this light that it becomes less precise to use *diaspora* to describe the varied forms of and reasons for Indian migration as well as gendered expressions of Indian culture in the United States since the end of the nineteenth century. Instead, I rely on transnational and gendered understandings of the Indian dancer and the immigrant communities in which she finds purchase to ask: For whom are such expressions useful or empowering? What do they accomplish? For example, in what spaces do stories like Davaluri’s or Pandey’s build bridges—what Inderpal Grewal (2005) terms “connectivities” between India and the United States—or lead to what Sara Ahmed (2004) has called “affective economies”?²⁶

To answer these questions requires one to understand how culture industries, like dance, music, and cinema, have shaped and been shaped by two related but distinct discourses: caste and race. In Indian American immigrant communities, particularly those which have not only maintained connections to India but also established their own positionality in the United States through model minority mythologies, the mechanisms of white supremacy have engendered a complicated and often unproductive dialogue between anticaste and antiracist projects. It is in this context that oversimplified Asian American symbols like the Indian dancer appear in sharpest relief. For example, in cases like mine, participating in musical practices that extended from my voice (which alone does not betray my Indian body) and my ability to assimilate into white Texas culture exposes how the multicultural narrative, which is often inherently both dominant-caste and antiblack, finds purchase among Indian Americans. Framed this way, cultural forms, like dance, produce desirable and docile immigrants like Nina Davuluri, who enact model minority behaviors, like Indian dance, while echoing multicultural logics like “I’m American first” and so are not to be confused with those who aren’t willing to capitulate to the United States and its management of racial difference.

Thinking of the Indian dancer in this way—as a racialized and casteist affective economy—allows for an examination of how identifications build within and upon each other and continue to rely on simultaneously fetishizing and silencing imperial capitalist flows and logics.²⁷ To be sure, the choice to be or not to be a dancer is one that has preoccupied scholars of Indian public culture in a variety of ways for the past sixty years. Extending from this awareness, I ask, who chooses to participate in the capitalist reproduction of a dancerly Indian womanhood? What is the affection that drives this participation? Is it a choice? There are many interrogations of choice in the following pages, but none as poignant as the choice to be an Indian woman at her most iconic: a dancer. In asking how the doing of citizenship—performance—calls into existence the very communities in which it seeks inclusion, I consider the social and cultural force that transnationalism centrifuges.

In this light, the narrative on who wants to and gets to dance is inextricably intertwined with broader conversations about caste/kinship, marriage, racial affinity, and class mobility beginning in the early twentieth century and continuing to the present. Following the 1965 Act, participation in dance not only offered and continues to offer status and mobility for Indian families in India and

in the United States, but also facilitates what Aihwa Ong (1999) has described as “flexible citizenship.”²⁸ The families for whom classical dance, distinct from music, becomes essential are those for whom a transnational citizenship is important for its material upper-class-and-caste Hinduism. In other words, dance and its affective economies both provide examples of how “cultural logics inform and structure border crossings as well as state strategies” and draw attention to the ways transnationalism produces new hegemonies through circular forms of materialist cultural production (Ong 1999, 5).

Embedded in this analysis is a critique of both race and caste formations in mobile transnational communities, that is, the predominantly Hindu immigrant communities for whom the Persons of Indian Origin and now Overseas Citizen of India visa categories have proven most useful (see Jain 2013). These are individuals whose immigration history makes it possible to conceive of themselves as hyphenated, transnational, or dual citizens—a distinction that indicates class and caste mobility by way of English-language proficiency (see also Subramanian 2019, 251). These are the consumers and producers of what is, even by conservative estimates, a more than billion-dollar *arangetram* market, which connects costume makers and musicians, among many other industries in India, to dancers and dance teachers across the world.²⁹ Ultimately, the methods and means by which these industries have grown speaks to the power and reach of transnational networks, primarily those that increasingly rely on the racialized and materialist politics of the body.

Feminist Praxis

One feminist project could be to give the killjoy back her voice. Whilst hearing feminists as killjoys might be a form of dismissal, there is an agency that this dismissal rather ironically reveals. — SARA AHMED, *The Promise of Happiness*

Praxis in this book is not simply practice, which in conventional understandings is separable from creation (*poesis*) and proceeds from theory. Rather, extending from Hannah Arendt’s formulations, praxis refers to action and agency, which both constitutes and is constituted by voice. Arendt’s conceptualization recognizes, in other words, that full citizenship requires both voice and body in public cultures (Arendt 1958, 24–25). The now well-rehearsed critiques of capitalism and mass mediation have arguably privileged the power of the voice at the expense of the body.³⁰ As much as the inverse framework—that of embodiment—has generated interventional potential, it is still incumbent upon feminist scholars to make a case for treating the body as worthy of examination without

separating or reifying the sound that it makes or to which it moves.³¹ This is my goal by adopting a praxical method: to anchor a space in which the voice includes rather than precludes the political potential of the body and to dislodge the enduring and reductive colonial logics that separate and differentiate music from dance.³² To be sure, a great deal of feminist scholarship on performance cultures hinges on the intellectual legacies that emerge from colonialism but devotes less attention to ways that gender relations are inseparable from power differentials based on race, nation, caste, and class, among other categories.³³ As many black, transnational, and global South feminists have noted, gender cannot and must not be reduced to liberal and discursive formations of equality or inequality. To do so, after all, would not only mistake equality for equity but would also forget that the history of gender cannot be understood without a critical understanding of empire.

However, a difficulty one encounters when advocating for a transition to a praxical method in the Euro-American academy is that much of the scholarship on gender and expressive culture has relied on Judith Butler's theories of performativity and embodiment.³⁴ While important for understanding how gender is reiterated through performance cultures, Butler's model does not adequately account for the divergent conditions that women navigate in transnational or postcolonial settings. In fact, Butler herself acknowledges the limitations of applying her theory outside of a white liberal feminist context when she notes, "We do not know our own modernity, the conditions of its own emergence and preservation . . . or rather, we are showing that what we call 'modernity' is a form of . . . cultural erasure. Most importantly, we see the violence done in the name of preserving western values" (2004, 230–31).

To rely on a white liberal feminist and oversimplified "we" model to study the Indian dancer does not help one explain why some women, especially in India, are framed as victims, reinscribing cartographies of the third world or subaltern for simply daring to attend a movie, while others are cast as exceptional heroines for dancing to the very same movie songs on an international stage.³⁵ To unsettle this widely accepted paradox, I rely on Sara Ahmed's conceptualization of a feminist killjoy to expose the heteropatriarchal discourses that simultaneously valorize Davuluri's body and its public objectification while grieving Pandey's.

Within my own family history, for example, the dancer's voice points not only to broader conversations on sovereignty and selfhood but also to considerations of class, caste, and the shift from feudal patronage to national-classical cultural expressions.³⁶ A family story I heard more times than I could count attempted to explain why my mother's involvement with dance lasted only until

FIGURE I.2.
My mother (aged
nine) in 1955 at
her final dance
performance.



the age of nine (see figure I.2). The explanation my elders usually provided was that dance cost too much for my maternal grandparents to reasonably afford. The costumes, the jewelry, the training that a dancer would need to perform — they were out of reach on my grandfather's meager salary. Only wealthy families sent their daughters to dance classes. Though she repeatedly stated her wish to learn dance, it was cheaper to teach my mother how to sing, so that's what they did instead.

This overly simplified monetary explanation masks the emergence of an affective economy in India, through and by dance cultures and the bodies of young, wealthy, unmarried women, which is said to have existed separate from music cultures in the mid-twentieth century. In my mother's case, this was also a matter of respectability, and for a Brahmin family in the 1950s, the old adage held true: "If a girl danced on stage after a certain age, who would marry her?" The belief that a woman's marriageability could be compromised if she engaged

in the dance world, but not if she sang, exposes an established construction of public cultures. This construction reveals uniquely gendered practices of citizenship, which I interrogate in chapter 3, through the memories of midcentury film dancer L. Vijayalakshmi and her natal family's investment in her dance career. In turn, the fact that in the US context dance training is considered an essential component of an Indian woman's marriageability suggests that it is not only money matters that shaped such decisions and discourses of gender.

In the Indian context, my analysis of a body-voice, dancer-singer divide extends Neepa Majumdar's historical work on women and stardom in Hindi-language cinema. Focusing on film reception (magazines, interviews, commentary), Majumdar (2009, 189) drew critical attention to how a "split" between body and voice shaped divergent "association[s] of certain moral and emotional traits" for playback singers, who provide the vocals, and dancer/actresses, respectively. Majumdar's analysis revealed that Hindi cinema publics, or at least those represented in the written records she draws upon, experienced the body-voice divide as a productive, doubly formed way to connect with stars as both a body (dancer/actress) and a voice (playback singer). Importantly, this divide in Hindi film songs cultivated an "ideological investment in the split between the eroticized female body and the pure female voice" (Majumdar 2001, 175).

For a variety of reasons, a voice-body split in Telugu public cultures and, arguably, in south Indian public cultures more generally, resists easy comparison to its Hindi counterparts. First and perhaps most obviously, Telugu was and remains both a regional and subregional linguistic identity in statist formulations (see Srikanth 2013). Thus, expressions of Telugu culture are shaped by not only intranational but also intraregional politics of representation. In the Telugu context, these politics of representation circulate through performance cultures that extend to and from cinema. As I argue in chapters 1 and 2, the caste identity of Telugu singer-dancer-actresses throughout the early era of cinema shaped public perceptions of their performance in ways that endure until today. Second, Telugu stars like Bhanumati Ramakrishna (1924–2005) played an outsized role in shaping public taste habits around both music and dance in the midcentury. Bhanumati both provided her own vocals and directed and produced her own films.³⁷ Indeed, the processes of dissociation and reassociation of voice and/or body for south Indian performers like Bhanumati destabilize facile understandings of national and linguistic citizenship.

In the US context, my intervention builds upon Kyra Gaunt's work, which emphasizes the interdependence of bodies, gender, race, and voice in public culture. Research like Gaunt's (2006, 2) highlights "learned and oral-kinetic practices that teach an embodied discourse of gender and racial roles" and thus

offers the possibility to reorient participant-observation away from normative and ableist methods that privilege specific kinds of hearing over others (see also Robinson 2020). I respond to Gaunt's appeal for a reflexive and "somatic historiography" to resist separating voice from body, gender from race, and feminism from place.

To move toward a more robust engagement with the experiences of Indian womanhood across a variety of geographical and temporal locales, I draw inspiration from Indian feminist thinkers such as Susie Tharu (1996) and Sharmila Rege (1995), black feminist theory by bell hooks (1989, 1992) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000), and critical race theory by Richard Delgado (1984, 1992) and Anne Anlin Cheng (2019). In theorizing the relationship between body and voice for the Indian dancer, I offer a preliminary answer to Cheng's query, "What does it mean to survive as someone too aestheticized to suffer injury, but so aestheticized that she invites injury?" (2019, xii). By foregrounding ethnography, I strive to confront the long, lingering shadows of positivism in research on performance (see also Ottenbeerg 1990). This approach acknowledges and transcends the deep and abiding colonial roots of archival epistemologies and the racialized distinction of ethnography like that presented in this work as "native" or "auto."³⁸

On Methodology

Cinema must be understood as both ethnographic and archival evidence. For example, in chapter 2 I rely on critical historiography of film archives in order to unsettle sedimented ideas of India and Indian history (see especially Blouin and Rosenberg 2011; Stoler 2008; Trouillot 1995). Extending such critiques, I offer memory and family narratives—versions of what Saidiya Hartman (2019, xiii) has called "close narration" or what Hazel Carby (2019) has described as "imperial intimacies"—as both evidence and counterevidence to the historical. In other words, I do not present such narratives to suggest that they can stand in for the whole, but rather to draw attention to the way historical accounts often cannot reflect women's varied experiences. By highlighting liminal characters whose lives did or do not mirror normative accounts of Indian womanhood, I complicate the narratives that shape notions of belonging and possibility.

In this way, I also actively contest the category of autoethnography. I offer memories and family stories while moving back and forth between film spaces, dance studio spaces, and everyday spaces to highlight that my experiences as well as those of my interlocutors exist on a dynamic continuum even and especially as I write from the US American academy. To acknowledge that continuum

requires a recognition of shifting power structures that not only reflect and are reflected by mediated experiences but also refract across both time and space. Thus, one of the phenomena I explore through a self-reflexive engagement in the film archive, as well as in the dance studio, is the expectation that my subjectivity requires segregation, framing, and recuperation *as auto* in order to be included and located within hegemonic and historical accounts. The logic that brackets my ethnography as distinct from those which emerge from Indians “in India” recalls Mary Douglas’s observations on the abominable—such attitudes require that my voice be “singled out and put into a very special kind of ritual frame that marks it off . . . [and] ensures that the categories which the normal avoidances sustain are not threatened or affected in any way” (2003, 204). This is the function of *auto* when applied to feminist or critical race ethnography—it implicitly marks some perspectives as impure or inaccurate and in doing so reinscribes logics of historicity and authenticity (see Chin 2016, 193–94).

Following this recognition, I also resist the tendency of ethnography to turn the self into a field consequently vulnerable to mining and extraction. I accept and embrace that there are always chasms and incongruities between experience and representation, and so I create and hold space for those separations rather than force them to align or close.³⁹ Embracing this space of neither-here-nor-there, but somehow both, I acknowledge that to exist in such spaces “is necessarily a praxical task. It is to enact a critique of racialized, colonial, and capitalist heterosexualist gender oppression as a lived transformation of the social” (Lugones 2010, 746–47). Through this recognition it becomes possible to uncover the objectification and racialized dehumanization of women’s bodies and to resist viewing them as neat icons of complicated and often contradictory historical and geopolitical dynamics.

Ultimately, this project uses a praxical method to challenge the reductive narratives that are used to describe Indian women and their experiences of belonging in this world. In this way, it becomes possible to bring Davuluri’s story and Pandey’s into conversation with each other without requiring them to collapse into one story. This method, which allows me to move across the distinct but related analytical planes of ethnographic and archival research, allows for a richer understanding of why and how over the course of my life I have understood my body as public but my voice as not. This understanding of the voice, distinct from the body, as deracinated, points to the necessity of a feminist, a critical race, and a critical caste method when examining identity formations, especially those that rely on bodily expressions.

In this regard, my commitment to a transnational and ethnographic feminist method aligns with queer and liberationist work from, rather than about,

the global South, especially at a time when women like Jyoti Singh Pandey are too easily portrayed as nothing more than victims.⁴⁰ An important piece of this project includes a reflexivity that connects research with the institutional spaces where this research is housed, validated, and supported. I draw my inspiration from Sara Ahmed's (2012) phenomenological work on the industrialization of diversity and inclusion initiatives in the academy and specifically her acknowledgment that the epistemological foundations upon which we live our institutional lives also shape the very disciplinary orientations by which such research becomes legible as scholarship. Ahmed makes a point that is critical to this project: that as scholars who work in institutional spaces that are themselves extensions of colonial enterprises, we are often complicit in perpetuating and in many cases fetishizing inequity in our forms of inquiry and knowledge production. Rather than knowingly support such enterprises, I foreground the memories and voices of women, dancers, singers, actresses—sometimes all of the above—whose intersections with society span a vast and at times incongruous expanse of what qualifies as an Indian womanhood.

Chapter Overview

Though this book is structured chronologically, the chapters do not need to be read in sequence. Each chapter stands alone, beginning with an ethnographic vignette. In every chapter, extending from and echoing family memories, I trace a narrative that allows me to destabilize conceptualizations of womanhood (chapter 1), caste (chapter 2), citizenship (chapter 3), and silence (chapter 4). In each chapter I rely upon the unevenness and the paradoxes of dance and dancers in Telugu cinema to draw our attention past the symbolic body of the public, performative Indian woman, to the spectrum of affective economies—what Ahmed (2004, 15) describes as a “stickiness” of symbols that elicit collective shame or pride (see also Sedgwick 2003).

For example, in chapter 1, I examine the career of an early twentieth-century actress, Sundaramma, whose performances of song and dance on-screen have since come to typify expressions of caste and womanhood in Telugu public cultures. Applying self-reflexive and critical methods of feminist praxis, I bring ethnographic research in the dance studio into conversation with film history and analysis to expose the way that courtesan identities are simultaneously embraced and disavowed by Brahmin dance cultures. In so doing, I interrogate settled notions of south Indian womanhood, and I argue that a mythical courtesan was called into existence through film cultures in the early twentieth century in order to provide a counterpoint against which a modern and national Brah-

minical womanhood could be articulated. To make this case, I bring together a constellation of events that participated in the construction of south Indian womanhood, especially the rise of sound film against the backdrop of growing anticolonial and nationalist sentiments in the early twentieth century.

In chapter 2, I trace the public and performative expressions of Brahmin womanhood to cinema and radio publics as well as advertising cultures, which installed and equated notions of beauty, gender, and caste. Extending from research at the National Film Archives of India in Pune and drawing on material history and memory within my own family, I focus on the use of commercially available film songbooks as well as personal, handwritten song diaries in establishing both caste hierarchies and racialized understandings of feminine beauty. Throughout the chapter, I highlight the career of midcentury actress Bhanumati, who despite, or perhaps precisely because of, her alleged courtesan lineage emerged as a symbol of Brahmin womanhood in the post-Independence era of Telugu cinema.

Chapter 3 examines how social and identificatory processes that rely on language, like performance cultures, can and do destabilize the way one might experience citizenship and its forms of belonging. Focusing on the era in which India was divided into linguistic states (1956–76), I explore how the politics of language in Telugu culture industries are also reflected by and through gendered and caste-based cultural expressions like dance. I complicate nationalist and regionalist narratives of linguistic identity, caste, and gender by widening the contextual frame to include a transnational analysis. By highlighting the way language and citizenship appear through the dancing body, I uncover the racialized and sexualized mechanisms by which the classical dancer became legible in film in this era, the same era during which dominant-caste south Indians who had been educated in English-medium schools were able to immigrate en masse to the United States under new immigration and civil rights laws. I focus on how the popularity of the racialized Indian dancer, often known as a vamp or club dancer in this era, overlapped with the processes by which institutional dance schools in south India produced noteworthy classically trained dancers. To better understand how and why the south Indian dancer—the Nina Davaluris of the world—became essential to expressions of a globally recognizable citizenship for Indian women, in the final section of this chapter I consider the platitudes and paradoxes of her characterization through the memories of a dancer who played her.

Following the now-iconic Indian classical dancer across various forms of public culture, in chapter 4 I take a closer look at the racialized logics that have crystallized around her, situating her as a global signpost for India in the twenty-

first century. Focusing on the period from approximately 1990 to the present, I bring together ethnographic research in both India and the United States and excerpts from field notes, film and media analysis, and critical race and feminist critiques to examine the unstable and at times contradictory formations of womanhood that rely on transnational identifications of caste, gender, and race. Highlighting widely accepted narratives of Hindu heteropatriarchy, that Brahminical musical knowledge finds physical expression in the silent and compliant body of a performer, I challenge received notions of silence to unsettle sedimented concepts of gender in dance spaces and beyond. Thinking about dance as a space of political possibility, as not only a source of struggle and resistance but also where silence can be transformed into its own form of power, allows for a more robust feminist analysis of the Orientalized and fetishized Indian dancer. Ultimately, I interrogate how cinematic understandings of a normative womanhood have operated for generations of dominant-caste Telugus and an overdetermined category of “south Indian” women.

In the epilogue, I bring conversations on caste, gender, sexuality, and citizenship in South Asian studies into dialogue with perspectives on race and racialization in Indian American immigrant circles. Working thematically, but moving between the United States and India, this project traces how both *performance* and *womanhood* became political categories starting in the early twentieth century, and continuing into the twenty-first, while listening carefully to how such transnational movement has been accomplished and normalized.

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20 • INTRODUCTION

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I was a graduate student, the acknowledgments section was my favorite part of a book because it was a moment to really connect with the author and learn about what had brought them to the threshold I find myself at now—looking back on an intellectual trajectory that has traversed many seasons of my life. In my case, this journey has spanned my entire life, and so there are many people to acknowledge and to memorialize for the role they have played in shaping the work in these pages. To begin at the beginning, I am grateful for the guidance and influence of my two childhood gurus, Rathna Kumar and Anuradha Subramanian. Rathna Auntie has remained a constant in my life in ways that have indelibly shaped who I am and how I experience the world.

Over the course of my research, I have had the good fortune to train under as well as befriend a number of dancers, in the United States as well as in India. In Chennai, I am thankful for the time I spent training with Vempati Ravi Shankar. In Hyderabad, as serendipity would have it, I was introduced to Vempati Ravi Shankar's sister Bali, whose talent has forever changed the way I think about what it means to be a dancer. I want to thank Kamala Rajupet of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, who, unbeknownst to her, made a childhood dream come true one rainy week in May 2011. And I am grateful for L. Vijayalakshmi or Vijjiakka for opening up her home and her dance history to me.

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Besides the teachers who shaped my study of dance, countless individuals and institutions along the way have made my research logistically possible. My early fieldwork as a doctoral student was funded by generous support from the US Department of Education Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Program. In Houston, Raju Vanguri and the Vanguri Foundation helped me lay the groundwork for my research in critical Telugu studies. In New Delhi, the Indiresans provided me with a sense of security and home away from home, while the staff at the AIIS in Gurgaon made it easy to look forward to long days of archival work. Utpola Borah and Umashankar at the ARCE deserve special thanks for providing such quality company and homemade filter coffee during otherwise solitary days. In Vijayawada, Jandhyala Shankar and his wife, Kameshwari, provided comfort as well as transportation support, which made what would have been an impossible schedule enjoyable. In Pune, the staff at the National Film Archives, especially Venkata Sir, became friends and colleagues I could trust. Navid Ibrahim will always hold a special place in my heart for his incredible generosity and friendship, which, in a very real sense, made it possible to hear my own voice and follow my instincts to a healthier future.

My teachers, mentors, and classmates during my formal education at the University of Chicago were instrumental in preparing me for the challenges posed by my research. I am particularly grateful for my mentors in South Asian studies, Steven Collins, Davesb Soneji, and Tarini Bedi, who treated me like their own during my years as a graduate student in the Music Department. I am privileged to have shared intellectual space with Kaley Mason, Jayson Beaster-Jones, Jaime Jones, Ameera Nimjee, Rasika Ajotikar, Lily Wohl, and Michael Figueroa because of my graduate training in ethnomusicology. Though we only met by accident one fateful night at the Flamingo, Maria Welch has become a place I can call home, and I am grateful for her friendship and her wisdom. Stephen Gabel, Larry Zbikowski, and Tiffany Trent transcended the role of teachers somewhere along the way to become the finest friends I feel honored to call my own. At Earlham College, Aletha Stahl and James Logan became mentors and now comrades in more ways than one. I met and was influenced by an incredible community at Earlham, especially Julia Logan and Kumar Jensen, and both my work and my politics are a product of the two years I spent there as a visiting assistant professor.

Because my work lives at the crossroads of many disciplines, I have wandered at times a circuitous path, but it has brought me into conversation with so many generous thinkers. This work benefited enormously from the insight of three anonymous readers. In feminist and queer studies circles, Sonja Thomas, Vanita Reddy, Sarah Pinto, Steven Moon, and Kareem Khubchandani offered

critical feedback when this project was in its early stages. In film and media studies, Usha Iyer, Uma Bhrugubanda, Anupama Kapse, Tejaswini Ganti, Costas Nakassis, and Cassidy (Minai) Behling have all offered feedback and resources over the years. I would not have survived the final stages of edits, especially of chapter 2, without Swarnavel Eswaran Pillai, Samhita Sunya, and Isabel Huacuja Alonso. I am grateful for the kindness and support offered by Shreena Gandhi, Jyoti Puri, Sneha Annavarapu, Srimati Basu, Gautham Reddy, Aparajita De, Priya Srinivasan, Liz Bucar, Gayatri Sethi, and Harshita Kamath. For Yashoda Thakore and Neilesh Bose, “thank you” is simply not enough for all the years they have remained by my side and encouraged me to keep going. Seeta Chaganti, Stephanie Evans, Marie Carvalho, Aaron Fox, Katherine Lee, Shzr Ee Tan, and Hyun Kyong Chang have all stepped in to provide care and camaraderie when I needed it most, and I am grateful for their belief in me as well as this project. Jeff Roy, Pavithra Prasad, and Lalita du Perron have provided a soft place to land and have loved me every step and misstep of the way. This work has benefited from their intellectual companionship, queer community, and steadfast belief that a better world, if not a kinder academy, is possible.

During my time in Texas from 2014 to 2019, I had the good fortune of finding several kindred spirits who have remained present in my life in more ways than one. This book would not be what it is without Fadeke Castor, who encouraged me to submit to Duke University Press. I am grateful to my brilliant and fiercely feminist therapist, Iris Carrillo, and wish there were more mental health care providers like her in this world. There are simply not enough words to express my gratitude to Harris Berger and Shona Jackson, both of whom have consistently modeled for me the kind of scholar and the kind of mentor I strive to be. At the University of Georgia, I have been privileged to call Josie Leimbach, Lynae Sowinski, Sara Emery, Maggie Snyder, Michael Heald, Emily Gertsch, Emily Koh, Jennifer LaRue, and Rielle Navitski friends and colleagues. My students, especially Roberto Ortiz, Lee Thomas Richardson, Urooj Ali, Aleeza Rasheed, Suvitha Viswanathan, Areeb Gul, and Alina Ahmed, have been brilliant interlocutors. I am especially grateful for the generous mentorship and support of Kecia Thomas, Kelly Happe, Patricia Richards, Susan Thomas, and Juanita Johnson-Bailey and the affirming environment they have fostered for junior faculty at the Institute for Women's Studies.

Though she only recently learned of my rather silly nickname for her, I am forever indebted to Elizabeth Ault, aka Glinda, not only for her editorial stewardship but also for her intellect and deeply feminist ethics. Because of her and the conversations she helped me join, I have come to understand how generative and clarifying the peer review process can be. Though the academy remains

a complicated place, to say the very least, it is encouraging to know that there are spaces like DUP and people like her, and like Ben Kossak and Liz Smith, in this world. I am grateful for the chance she provided to be in community with my senior colleagues, especially the ever-generous and brilliant Elizabeth Chin, aka Glinda 2. Over the last few years, my two Glindas have pushed me to grow into my own ideas and provided constructive feedback every step of the way. This project became a book because of them, and no “thank you” will ever be enough for what their support and kindness has meant to me.

Two mentors deserve special mention here. Kirsten Pai Buick responded to me, a junior colleague she had never met, on a public social media post in 2019. At the time, I was rather desperately in search of feminist-of-color mentorship, and she responded to my many and at times redundant questions with generosity and patience. She has since become the person I turn to for all things large and small in this academic journey. Because of her, I have gained confidence in my own knowledge, and because of her I have learned what it means to live and write in my truth; to, as she would say, remember that I am “my mother’s daughter.” If I said any of this to her, she would simply respond to me or any mentee by saying, “Thank YOU for letting me help you,” but I hope she reads these words and understands that mentors like her are rare gems. I count myself incredibly lucky to have found her.

There are some mentors whose commitment to their mentees seems unbelievable when you read about it in an acknowledgments section. That person in my case is Travis A. Jackson. I realize that any set of words I might arrange to describe what he has done for me over these last ten years might read as hyperbolic, but they are not. Travis planted the seeds that grew into the ideas found throughout this book during the question-and-answer session of my dissertation defense on September 1, 2011. He shined a bright, if uncomfortable, light on positionality, on what it means to consider oneself an ethnographer, and the questions he posed that day have shaped my intellectual journey in ways I probably cannot fully understand just yet. It is not an exaggeration to say Travis has read every word of this book more than once and debated every claim, not to mention grammatical rule, with me more than twice. He has believed in me, challenged me, and supported me, but perhaps more importantly, he has consistently reminded me to embrace the process—to recognize, honor, and fully experience the journey. He has demonstrated for me what it means to lead an academic life of integrity. This book is a testament to his investment in my growth and well-being. I hope he is proud of me.

Because this book is a sustained meditation on my family’s migration history, it is both obvious yet difficult to express how much I owe both my immedi-

ate and extended family for their support. In so many ways, my relationship to performance and to dance is a product of my family's own negotiation with the shifting landscapes in which they found themselves, British colonial subjects, Andhrates, then immigrants, and finally naturalized citizens of the United States of America. My family—especially my parents, Mallik and Vasanta Lakshmi Putcha; my maternal grandparents, Narsimham and Sreehari Ambatipudi; and my older brother, Girish—all shaped me into the thinker I am today. My mother, in particular, gave this project countless hours of her time and energy, screening films, correcting translations, and debating ideas with me into the wee hours of the night. This research truly would not have been possible without her. My extended family, especially my aunts and uncles, Kanth and Suneetha Duvvury, Uma Ambatipudi, Nata Duvvury, Bala Chavali, Kumari Susarla, Sujatha Sarma, and Prasad Vepa, have all been interlocutors and cothinkers along the way, double-checking translations, fielding an onslaught of YouTube links, and just generally being there for me throughout it all.

I began writing this book in May 2015, months after I secured my first permanent (nonadjunct) position. My mother passed away suddenly from a catastrophic brain aneurysm while she was driving to work on a beautiful fall day in September 2015. It would not be an overstatement to say that this book is a product of my grief and my unfinished conversations with her. In more ways than one, it has allowed me to get to know her in ways I had not yet been able, to listen for the quiet truths that shape women's lives and possibilities. The original dancer's voice for me, after all, was hers. I grew up dancing to her voice, as she often sang for me to be able to practice. My senses of being and of knowing in this world are a product of her indefatigable mission—that my life could and would be better, freer, and fuller than the one she was allowed to live. She was not allowed to dance, so the story goes, so I did. She was not allowed to feel the feeling of her body moving to music, so I must. We are all made by our mothers, but in my case this statement is insufficient. My mother's brand of feminism, the kind where women's creativity and pleasure is first and foremost, their own, has remained a guiding light for me, especially in her absence. I am grateful to be her daughter.

In the years since the apocalyptic experience of losing her, I have healed and grown. The people who made this possible helped bring this project to completion and so deserve special mention here. My father, Mallik Putcha, whose role behind the scenes was often unheard and unacknowledged, has become a new kind of feminist interlocutor in my life. I am indebted to him and his narrations of dance history that have shaped the scholarship in these pages. I am grateful that I got a chance to hear the dancer's voice through his recollections and for his belief in and support of me and my work. Thank you, Nanna.

Mark Watson came into my life when I least expected it and has stood by my side through the many (many) lives this project has lived. This book and my journey more generally are evidence not only of his love for me, but of a commitment to the idea that feminism starts at home. Because of him and the way he has loved me, I have been able to see more clearly, think more deeply, and live more bravely.

And finally, a note of gratitude for the rest of the squad: Abigail the Snail (2003–18), Harriett the Fluff, and Woody the Tiny Horse have all played an important part in keeping me grounded. I am grateful for their companionship.

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GLOSSARY

ABHINAYAM — Facial expressions.

AḌAVU — Basic step.

AMMAYI — Colloquial term in Telugu for girl.

ANUPALLAVI — Second section in many *karnāṭak* song forms.

ARANGETRAM — Translates to “ascending the stage.” Marks the debut performance of a young dancer. See also *rangapraveṣam*.

ARDHAMANDALA/ARAMANḌI — Half-sitting position.

BHĀGAVATAM — Theatrical, staged production. Usually based on themes from the epics.

BHŌGAM — A reference to a courtesan woman in south India. Etymologically traced to the courtly culture of *bhōja* or enjoyment under the Nayaka kings of Tanjavur (r. 1532–1676).

BRAHMIN — In the caste hierarchy, the highest caste. Often historicized as priests or scholars.

BURRA KATHA — Oral storytelling tradition common in Telugu-speaking regions.

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CHARANAM — Final section in many *karnāṭak* song forms.

DALIT — Refers to oppressed caste communities in South Asia.

DARṢAN — Seeing and being seen by a Hindu deity; a reference to prayer.

DEVADĀSĪ — A servant of god. A reference to a social group of courtesan women in south India who dance and sing primarily in temples.

GAJJELU — Ankle bells used by dancers; also known as *gungaroos*.

GAMAKA — Melodic ornament.

GRANDHIKAM — Formal, written style of Telugu, often used to denote Brahmin speech.

GURU — Teacher.

HARIJAN — Reference to oppressed caste communities.

JATHI — A technical section in a dance that focuses on footwork and virtuosity.

JĀVALI — Song tradition similar to the *padam* associated with courtesan performance practices.

KAĈĒRI — Classical music concert.

KARNĀṬAK — Codified system of music associated with the southern regions of India.

KATHAK — Dance style associated with northern Indian court cultures.

KĪRTANAM — A bipartite song form in south Indian classical (*karnāṭak*) music. The formal sections, in order, are *pallavi* and *charanam*. Plural, *kīrthanālu*.

KṚITI — A tripartite song form in south Indian classical (*karnāṭak*) music. The formal sections, in order, are *pallavi*, *anupallavi*, and *charanam*.

KUM-KUM — Dyed, dried, ground turmeric; used in Hindu rituals, also known as vermilion or *sindhoor*.

LĀSYA NARTHAKI — Graceful dancing woman. A reference to courtesan and, in some cases, temple dance.

MAṄḌAPAM — A decorated proscenium used as a stage for Hindu wedding ceremonies.

MEJUVĀṆĪ — Performed for a host. A courtesan salon performance.

MUGASIRSHA — A *mudra*, often used to denote a flute.

MUDRA — Hand gesture.

NADAKA — Equivalent to *bols* and *solkaṭṭu* but a phrase more commonly used in *kuchipudi* practice.

NĀDASWARAM — Double-reed wind instrument.

NĀMAKARANAM — A naming ceremony common in Hindu communities.

NĀṬAKAM — A drama, play, or theatrical presentation.

NATṬUVANGAM — Refers to both the hand cymbals (*tālālu*) and the direction provided during a dance performance by the guru or dance master.

NĀṬYA — Drama. As a technique in dance, incorporates hand gestures but relies generally on first-person narration.

NĀYIKA — A feminine character or heroine in dance.

NṚṬṬA — Technical or abstract dance, that is, footwork.

PADAM — Song/poetry common in south India.

PALLAVI — First section in many *karnāṭak* song forms.

PAṬṬU — A high-quality silk prized in south India.

PĀVURA — A mythological bird who is said to have carried messages between lovers.

PERUGU — plain yogurt.

PURDAH — A religious and social practice of women's seclusion.

RĀGAM — Mode or set of pitches in Indian classical music systems.

RĀJA — King.

RĀJANARTHAKI — King's court dancer.

RANGAPRAVEṢAM — Translates to "ascending the stage." Marks the debut performance of a young dancer. See also *arangetram*.

RASA — Literally, juice; mood in dance and music.

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RASIKAS — Dance and music connoisseurs, particularly in Chennai.

SABHA — Public assembly space. Often a reference to a performance hall for music and dance in Chennai.

SĀHITYAM — Literature, poetry, lyrics.

SAMPRADĀYA — Performance practice.

SARGAM — South Asian music notation system.

SIGGU — Shame/modesty.

SIMHAMUKHA — Literally, lion face; a common mudra.

SINDHOOR DĀNAM — The giving of *sindhoor* (vermilion); the mark of a married Hindu woman.

ŚIṢYA — Student. Also appears as *sishya*.

ŚṚṄĀRA — One of the nine (*nava*) *rasas* that depicts romantic, erotic, sensual emotions. Generally expressed for a hero (*nāyaka*) by a heroine (*nāyika*).

STRĪ VEṢAM — Woman impersonation or woman disguise.

SWARA-STHĀNAM — Literally, pitch standing. Refers to standardized taste habits in intonation.

TĀLAM — Tempo or beat. Also used to refer to many aspects of musical time, such as rhythm and meter.

THĀMBŪLAM — Ceremonial offering.

THAVIL — Double-barrel drum.

TĪRMĀNAM — Also known as *muktaimpu*, a cadential pattern in *Karnatic* music. In *Adi talam* (8-beat cycle) *solkaṭṭu*, ta-din-gin-a-thom repeated thrice.

UPANAYANAM — Rite-of-passage ritual for young Brahmin men.

VIJÑĀNAM — Knowledge.

ZAMĪNDĀR — Feudal landowner during colonial era.

NOTES

PROLOGUE

- 1 I use the term *south Indian* in this book to refer to the immigrant community of primarily Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada speakers in which I was raised in Houston, Texas. This distinction is also used in India to refer to those regions that previously belonged to the Madras Presidency. Today, these languages are associated with separate administrative regions in India: Tamil Nadu, United Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka, respectively. I use the term *Indian* throughout this book to denote an ethnic-national identification that correlates to the nation-state known since 1947 as the Republic of India. I use *South Asian* as a more general geopolitical and racial distinction, encompassing as it does areas known today as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.
- 2 I use *Hindu* throughout this book to refer to the ethnic identity that the term signposts in the twenty-first century. For further context on the collapsing of many streams of faith and thought under the politicized and now ethnic category of Hindu beginning in the nineteenth century, see Doniger (2009), Figueira (2002), and Omvedt (2006).
- 3 The career of Margaret Nixon McEathron (1930–2016), better known as Marni Nixon, deserves special mention here. Nixon provided the singing voice, separate from the speaking voice, for a number of women characters, in many cases offering her white voice to a nonwhite on-screen body (see Baron, Fleegler, and Lerner 2021; Smith 2003).
- 4 Jasmine stands apart from her counterparts in the 1980s and 1990s for a number of reasons, but primarily because she is the only princess who only sings with her

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prince. Every other princess during this period sang at least one solo, which leads Liske Potgieter and Zelda Potgieter to call her the “silent princess” (2016, 63). Jasmine’s songs were voiced by a Filipina singer and actress, Maria Lea Carmen Imutan Salonga (b. 1971), while her speaking voice was provided by a white actress, Linda Larkin (b. 1970). Salonga also provided singing vocals for the other 1990s Asian Disney princess, Fa Mulan (1998). Besides her work in Disney films, Salonga is known for her musical theater and Broadway work, especially her success playing the lead role in *Miss Saigon*. She is also known as “the first Asian” to win a Tony award.

- 5 The *arangetram* (also known as *rangapraveṣam*) translates to “ascending the stage,” and in hereditary performance cultures, particularly in Tamil- and Telugu-speaking regions, it refers to the solo debut public performance of a newly minted performer. Generally speaking, these events marked the end of many years of training and apprenticeship. In US settings today, this event has become akin to a debutante ball or a bat mitzvah, on average costing around \$50,000 USD. The summer months of June through September are known in South Asian communities as the *arangetram* season, with well-known gurus conducting one each weekend. Orchestras will often be flown in from India and remain for the entire season. In California, these events are often preceded by *arangetram* camps, where all the dancers slated to give these performances attend expensive retreats to foster a sense of focus and camaraderie.
- 6 In the caste system, Brahmin is considered the highest caste.
- 7 My parents were both employed by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s Johnson Space Center (NASA-JSC), or contractors of NASA-JSC, for their entire professional careers. My mother was the first Indian immigrant woman to reach the rank of GS-15 (General Service) at NASA-JSC, the highest rank in the US civil service. Though outside the scope of this project, there is a rich critical race and feminist history to be told about Indian immigrants in the space program, particularly in the 1980s to early 2000s before the Space Transportation System shuttle program was canceled. For recent research on South Asian immigration to Houston during the Cold War, see Quraishi (2020).
- 8 The term *dominant caste* refers to a caste that holds economic or political power and occupies a fairly high position in a social hierarchy. In this book I use the term *dominant caste* to denote the groups, like Brahmins, who have historically been categorized as forward, as numerically majoritarian, or who do not otherwise fall under scheduled caste or affirmative action categories in India (see Srinivas 1987).
- 9 *Model minority* is a reference to antiblack racial formations in the US context and characterizes Asian Americans as a monolithic group whose members are perceived to achieve a higher degree of socioeconomic success than the population average.
- 10 It might seem odd to cite someone as prominent in the critical feminist discourse as Salman Rushdie, especially in a book that claims to be committed to feminist praxis. To any reader who might find my invocation of his work troublesome, I want to acknowledge that I am aware of the negative aspects of his way of moving through the world and am also aware of how aptly his phrase captures what I am

describing. Please let this note attest to the fact that I am not excusing his behavior, nor am I asking people to forget it.

INTRODUCTION

- 1 To be eligible to compete in the Miss America beauty pageant, a woman must be unmarried, have never been pregnant, and be between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five. Indian classical dance refers to those dance styles which have been recognized by the Government of India as classical (see Putcha 2011). In the US context, Indian classical dance refers to the dance style generally understood to be from Tamil Nadu known as *bharatanatyam*.
- 2 The Hart-Cellar Act or Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 phased out the national origins quota system that had been in place since 1921. Whereas previous to the act, immigration to the United States from anywhere besides the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Germany was severely limited, this legislation instituted a preference system that focused on immigrants' skills and family relationships with citizens or residents. Numerical restrictions on visas from any country across the globe were set at 170,000 per year, not including immediate relatives of US citizens, nor special immigrants (including those born in independent nations in the Western Hemisphere, former citizens, ministers, or employees of the US government abroad).
- 3 For her dance style, Davuluri has credited US-based Bollywood choreographer Nankul Dev Mahajan. *Bollywood* refers to the Hindi-language film industry located in Bombay, today known as Mumbai.
- 4 In Telugu-speaking communities, Kamma and Reddy are designated as forward or dominant castes. Both of these groups, descending as they do from landowning castes, have significant control in economic sectors such as film and entertainment industries in contemporary south India (see Srinivas 2013).
- 5 See, e.g., Mani (1986) and Spivak (1985). For an important reorientation to the archive, see Arondekar (2009).
- 6 The overwhelming majority of feminist scholarship on the collusion between colonial administrators and Indian nationalists has focused on eastern regions of India, specifically the colonial state of Bengal (see, e.g., Chatterjee 1993; Sarkar 2001; Tambe 2000). For further analysis of caste from a feminist perspective, see Chakravarti (2003); Rao (2018). Two scholarly volumes that have explored this topic take a broader view (see Sangari and Vaid 1989; Sundar Rajan 1999). More recently, Durba Mitra (2020) examined the creation, theorization, and application of the concept of deviant female sexuality in colonial Bengal. Mitra's work offers important insight into why a gendered and heteronormative understanding of Indian sexuality became central to modern social thought.
- 7 The work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak looms large here. Her provocation "Can the Subaltern Speak" (Spivak 1988) captured a zeitgeist in Indian feminism as scholars recovered and reclaimed Indian womanhood and subjectivity as important sites of inquiry. For example, in history, see Sinha (1996, 2006) and Chakra-

varti (1998); in literary studies, see Sunder Rajan (2003) and Tharu and Lalita (1991); in sociology, see Puri (1999); in film/media studies, see Mankekar (1999) and Mehta (2011); in queer/diasporic studies see Gopinath (2005); and in dance and music studies, see Babiracki (2008), Chakravorty (2008), Meduri (1996), and O'Shea (2007). Recent work on Bollywood cinema and dance by Usha Iyer (2020) breaks new and important ground, reorienting our understanding of women who danced in Hindi films as musicians, creators, and choreographers.

- 8 I understand this critique as anticolonial, by which I both highlight and simultaneously turn away from the (ongoing) coloniality of gender, particularly in public cultures. In this way, I am also drawing on transnational and performance studies analysis of citizenship and resistance (see especially Castor 2017; Jackson 2012; Srinivasan 2012; Taylor 2016), though I am aware of and indebted to theorizations that differentiate the subject from citizen in the postcolonial context (Chatterjee 1993). Put another way, rather than situating this project around, before, or after colonialism, or situating performances of gender or womanhood within colonial logics of time, or by way of the distinctions that have been drawn between subject and citizen, I emphasize the ongoing praxical nature of this sort of work (see also Gopal 2019).
- 9 Classical dance forms like *kuchipudi* and *bharatanatyam*, as well as other styles across the subcontinent, feature what is known as temple jewelry. This style of jewelry relies on gold filigree work with red and green stones and pearl detailing.
- 10 Though primarily situated in and concerned with Euro-American or colonial settings, a growing field of scholars has offered tools for understanding how perceptions of the voice index processes of social or cultural identification (e.g., Bauman and Briggs 2003; Connor 2000; Dolar 2006; Ochoa Gautier 2014). More recently, scholars in the US academy have grappled with the enduring ontological divide in European philosophy between body and mind, also sometimes understood through related sensory categories, that is, the sonic and the visual (e.g., Eidsheim 2015, 2019; Meizel 2020; Sterne 2003). Some of these scholars have engaged with the hermeneutical approach developed by the Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero (2005), who has argued that the sensory experience of hearing the human voice not only precedes sight but also produces and upholds hierarchies of gender, identity, and social power. For a critical race and sonic approach to the visual, particularly the photographic medium, see Camp (2017). For theorizations of voice in the northern Indian context, see Rahaim (2012) and Roy (2019). For theorizations of voice and language specific to Tamil-speaking regions of India, see Weidman (2006, 2021).
- 11 Though I rely primarily on transnationalism to theorize the differentiation of Indian women's bodies and voices, I am aware of related and overlapping conceptualizations such as diaspora, cosmopolitanism, and globalization, to name but a few. Whereas diaspora is generally used to capture the migratory experiences of those dispersed from, outside of, and in many cases at a loss for a homeland (see, e.g., Safran 1991), globalization, modernity, and cosmopolitanism generally describe the social, economic, or cultural processes by which people, practices, or goods both

disperse and circulate and, by doing so, create new communities (see, e.g., Appiah 2007; Gilroy 1993; Kearney 1995). Discursive formations on how and why people and goods travel also overlap and intersect with theories of deregulation and neoliberalism (see, e.g., Brown 2019; Harvey 2007). For an alternate theorization of globalization that predates and decenters Euro-American hegemony, see Abu-Lughod (1989). In India, globalization also often refers to the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991 (see Nayar 2010).

- 12 For how transnationalism has shaped theories of Indian identity among Hindi speakers and on the US West Coast, see also Mankekar (2015). In terms of transnational dance cultures, I learned at a young age, for example, that telling someone that I was an Indian dancer was usually followed with, “Oh, like belly-dancing?” These responses bear witness to the limitations of multicultural initiatives, today sometimes packaged as “diversity, equity, and inclusion,” and their tendency to collapse categories for the sake of cultural competency. To this point, according to the organization South Asian Americans Leading Together, hate crimes against South Asians—Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs alike—spiked after the events of September 11, 2001. Though I wasn’t following the statistics in 2001, I knew the fear of backlash to be true as I watched my parents place American flags on our home and cars after a Sikh man was murdered by a white nationalist around the corner from where we lived in Houston, Texas. Since 9/11, anti-immigrant rhetoric has found new purchase under the openly racist immigration policies of the Trump administration, particularly its infamous “Muslim ban” and, more recently, the hyper-surveillance and incarceration of Latin American and Central American refugees across the US-Mexico border.
- 13 As Margaret Gibson (1988, 103) observed in her study of Indian immigrants in California, the goal of looking and sounding American, or “fitting in,” featured prominently and pointed clearly to the ways Indian parents sought to guarantee success for their children. See also Renato Rosaldo’s (1994) work on Latino communities in southern California.
- 14 The category of non-Hispanic white was introduced in the 2000 US Census. Additionally, Indians have been categorized under the white racial category at times over the course of the twentieth century (see also Bald 2013; Sen 2018). I was not the only Indian immigrant in my choir; however, I was the only non-Christian. My fellow Indian choirmate was Malayali and identified as Mar Thoma Syrian Christian (see Thomas 2018).
- 15 In the time since the 1965 Act, US immigration and labor policies have continued to favor dominant-caste Indians from south India. According to data collected by the US Census Bureau and compiled by the Center for Immigration Studies, Telugu is the most spoken Indian language after Hindi in the United States and is also the fastest-growing language group (see Ziegler and Camarota 2019). For research on the racialization of Indian-Americans in the late twentieth century, see Bhatia (2007); Koshy (1998).
- 16 Recent research on migration and indentured labor transcends the Atlantic-centered analysis Tinker (1974) famously described as “a new system of slavery”

(see Bates and Carter 2018; Bose 2021; Hurgobin and Basu 2015; Kumar 2017; Yang 2003).

- 17 The first US law to articulate the relationship between immigration and citizenship was the Naturalization Act of 1790. The opening line of the act mobilized racial categories in moral terms, stating that only “free white persons of good character” were eligible to apply for citizenship.
- 18 The Page Act of 1875, also known as the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1875, was the very first legislative action to bar immigration based on race, region, or gender. The Page Act set a series of gendered and sexualized racializations into motion, especially the assumption that “Oriental,” specifically Chinese, women would engage in prostitution if allowed into the country (see Abrams 2005; Chambers-Letson 2016).
- 19 Some scholars have noted that the overrepresentation of Sikh men in the British military and in the East India Company in the latter half of the nineteenth century could be attributed in part to the annexation of the Punjab region by the British Raj in 1849. The subsequent land reform measures under British administrative authorities effectively pauperized the region, leading young men to migrate or seek economic opportunity elsewhere (see Tatla 1995, 69).
- 20 The language in the 1917 law defined the Barred Zone as follows: “persons who are natives of islands not possessed by the United States adjacent to the Continent of Asia, situate south of the twentieth parallel latitude north, west of the one hundred and sixtieth meridian of longitude east from Greenwich, and north of the tenth parallel of latitude south, or who are natives of any country, province, or dependency situate on the Continent of Asia west of the one hundred and tenth meridian of longitude east from Greenwich and east of the fiftieth meridian of longitude east from Greenwich and south of the fiftieth parallel of latitude north, except that portion of said territory situate between the fiftieth and the sixty-fourth meridians of longitude east from Greenwich and the twenty-fourth and thirty-eighth parallels of latitude north, and no alien now in any way excluded from, or prevented from entering, the United States shall be admitted to the United States.” See An Act to Regulate the Immigration of Aliens to, and the Residence of Aliens in, the United States, Public Law 64–301, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 39 (1917): 874–98.
21. The first Indian, Bhicaji Framji Balsara (1872–1962), was granted naturalized US citizenship in 1909 by identifying as Parsi and therefore white (see Jamal and Naber 2008). The landmark case of *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1924) offers a useful example of how shifting racial logics, defined in terms of proximity to whiteness, have shaped the categories of Indian and Asian, respectively. For additional context, see Coulson (2017); Lee (2015).
- 22 In 1962, the UK closed its borders in response to backlash to an influx of South Asians, while in the same era the United States and Canada both revised their respective immigration policies (see Naujoks 2009).
- 23 An Act to Amend the Immigration and Nationality Act, and for Other Purposes, Public Law 89–236, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 79 (1965): 911–22. It is worth noting that Pakistan was defined as part of the Middle East in this act.

- 24 The 1965 Act remains the primary foundation for existing laws, though a major amendment was passed in 1990 under President George H. W. Bush (see Leiden and Neal 1990). For further context on Asian “high-skilled” immigration since 1990, see Saxenian (2000). For an account of how North American immigration policy both shaped and was shaped by South Asian labor history, see Sohi (2014).
- 25 The United States, Canada, and Australia all passed immigration laws banning nonwhite immigration from former British colonies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Those who migrated out of India did so to the UK as domestic “unskilled” labor or seamen before the dismantling of the British Empire (see Visram 2015), or to Australia and the United States after the UK began to limit immigration from former colonies starting with the Commonwealth Act of 1962 (see Karatani 2003; Maclean 2020). As one set of borders closed, another opened. For example, both Canada and Australia passed legislation closing their borders to nonwhite immigration in the early 1900s as white settlers attempted to redefine *immigrant*, and therefore who could be considered a citizen, along racial lines.
- 26 Ahmed (2004) defines an affective economy as that which allows for “me” to become “we” through emotion. I rely on Ahmed’s (2004, 2010) definition of affect and how it organizes (imagined) communities. Ahmed defines affect as emotion and orientation, both of which must be understood as cultural practices rather than simply psychological states.
- 27 This critique is informed by debates in South Asian studies, especially those which have been animated by a desire to differentiate postcolonial theory from subaltern studies (see, e.g., Chibber 2013). My approach acknowledges the long-standing debate among those who remain variously committed to postcolonial theory or subaltern studies as to how capitalism has shaped South Asian economies via colonialism, and how today such economies do or don’t differ from their European counterparts (see Gopal 2007).
- 28 In theorizing performance as a practice of citizenship, I am indebted to and inspired by N. Fadeke Castor’s conceptualization of a spiritual citizenship, which she defines as the “power of the sacred to inform new ways of belonging to community, the nation, and the transnational” (2017, 5).
- 29 The *arangetram* is but one example. Weddings, thread ceremonies (*upanayanam*), name ceremonies (*nāmakaranam*), and even funerals all fall under a similar logic of conspicuous and performative religious identification. For an analysis of consumerism within transnational citizenship practices, see Grewal (2005) and Mankekar (2015).
- 30 Postcolonial scholars have been committed to examining the shifting power of the technologically reproduced human voice in the rise of the nation-state as a political concept (see Danielson 1997; Huacuja Alonso 2018; McDonald 2013). Much of this work has examined attendant discourses of nostalgia, which follow in the wake of nationalist-modernist projects (see Hancock 2008). Scholars of film music in south India have explored the relationship between gender, vocal performance, playback singing, and sound technology (see especially Weidman 2021).

- 31 Scholars of blackface minstrelsy and its legacies in US entertainment and popular culture have consistently pointed out that the racialization of the body relies on the disembodiment/dissociation of the mind/voice from the body (see Nowatzki 2010; Sammond 2015; Weheliye 2014). See also work in US dance studies (e.g., Jackson 2011) and in film studies (e.g., Maurice 2002, 2013). For more recent extensions of this theory in understanding the controversy surrounding the simultaneous dehumanization and politicization of professional black athletes in the United States, see Bryant (2018).
- 32 See also Nikita Dhawan (2014) for a postcolonial critique of Enlightenment thought and its forms of rationality.
- 33 In their collected edition, for example, music scholars Pirkko Moisala and Beverley Diamond (2000) draw exclusively from global North feminist perspectives, while in her retrospective on feminism in the field, Ellen Koskoff (2014) examines her own career in the US academy. In explicating a liberal feminist outlook, Koskoff defines the distinction between gender and feminism discretely, describing “the study of gender [as] the *lens through which I most clearly see inequality*, but feminism [as] *how I enact the knowledge I have gained in this work to resist and dismantle it*” (2014, 7, emphasis in original).
- 34 Butler’s (1997) theory of performativity—the idea that gender identity is socially constructed and affirmed through speech and other repetitive forms of communication—draws in part on John L. Austin’s (1963) theory of “performative utterances.” Performance, as an event that involves both performer and audience, is not and should not be synonymous with performativity. Performativity refers specifically to performers’ actions, which not only represent an idea or identity but also actualize it.
- 35 Geographical markers such as third world or subaltern draw attention to the use of geopolitical demarcations as a shorthand for the lasting legacies of European imperialism, “whereby the global north holds the key to . . . liberalization . . . while the global south bears the brunt of its weaponization” (Puar 2017, 80).
- 36 Scholarship on Indian music has examined the shift from feudal patronage systems to capitalist cultural production (see, e.g., Qureshi 2001).
- 37 Bhanumati was both her first name and her stage name.
- 38 Kirin Narayan (1993) challenged anthropologists to consider issues of positionality that shaped conceptions of ethnography in “How Native Is a ‘Native’ Anthropologist?” Narayan’s body of work over the past two decades (e.g., 2007, 2008), especially the way she blends memory and family narrative with ethnography, is instructive for my own. See also Abu-Lughod (1990) and Visweswaran (1994). More recently, see Paik (2014).
- 39 This method has been called many things by scholars working to disrupt colonial forms of knowledge production. In performance studies, José Esteban Muñoz has theorized a subversive “disidentification,” which “is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (1999, 4).

In US feminist and Chicana studies, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) described this method as living at the “borderland,” and in postcolonial studies Homi Bhabha (1992) and Veena Das (2007) variously theorize a “witnessing” or being “interstitial” — an out-of-body feeling or “unhomeliness” — a sense of existing neither here nor there. See also Chawla and Atay (2018) for further analysis of autoethnography and decolonial praxis.

- 40 I am indebted here to the work of Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) as well as M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who theorized a critical transnational feminist praxis that reveals a “politics of location” (2010, 26).

1. WOMANHOOD

An early version of this chapter was previously published as “The Mythical Courtesan: Womanhood and Dance in Transnational India,” in *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 20, no. 1 (2021): 127–50. I thank the editors for their feedback and advice.

- 1 *Bhogam* women were public, performing women who sang and danced in feudal and colonial patronage systems and who are today understood as belonging to a marginalized caste community (see Kannabiran 1995, ws-62). For more context, see also the foundational work of Amrit Srinivasan (1984, 1985).
- 2 To protect the privacy of the individuals associated with the dance school, I use pseudonyms. For further context on ethics and self-reflexive ethnographic methods, see Madison (2005).
- 3 hooks’s theorization of an “oppositional gaze” in film and media builds upon the work of Stuart Hall (see especially Hall 1973, 1989).
- 4 Though I focus on south Indian examples in this chapter, see also the film dance careers of Anna Marie Gueizelor, stage name Azurie (1907–98), and Sitara Devi (1920–2014) in Iyer (2020).
- 5 Historians of media technology have documented how, by the 1940s, radio broadcasting emerged in India as a populist tool (see, e.g., Huacuja Alonso 2022; Lelyveld 1994; Sen 2014).
- 6 On coastal Telugu communities, see the work of Yashoda Thakore (2022).
- 7 Despite the consistent Hindu-izing of terms like *devadasi* or *nāyika*, the on-screen courtesan in Hindi-language cinema tends to be othered as a Muslim woman (see Dwyer 2004).
- 8 See Veena Oldenburg’s (1984) work on colonial Lucknow as well as Philippa Levine’s (2003) research on the legal history of prostitution under the British Empire. For further analysis of the evolution of public entertainment and sex work, see Kole (2009).
- 9 For a critical history of Lux soaps, see McClintock (2001) and Sivulka (1998).
- 10 See Hughes (2007, 2010) and Baskaran (1991) for perspective on Tamil film music.
- 11 In Gandhian terms, those marked as oppressed-caste, Dalit, or untouchables were also named *harijan* or “children of god.”
- 12 During this era there were significant feminist and anticaste movements led by Tamil and oppressed-caste revolutionaries like Periyar E. Ramaswamy (1879–1973).