

**ANUBHĀVA:**  
**HISTORYTELLING THROUGH BHARATANATYAM DANCE**  
**IN THE SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN DIASPORA**

---

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of Asian American Studies  
University of California, Irvine

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements of the Degree of  
Master of Arts

---

by  
Gunindu Sithunada Abeysekera  
June 2019



## **DEDICATION**

The Devadasis dedicated their lives to preserve our history.  
My family and mentors have dedicated themselves to help me preserve mine.  
This thesis and documentary film are dedicated to their care and legacies.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
DEDICATION.....	i
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
PROLOGUE.....	iv
<b>CHAPTER</b>	
I.    INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. <i>HER</i> STORY & ORIGINS.....	3
III.  THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS.....	7
IV.  INTERVIEW ANALYSES.....	15
Ramya Harishankar.....	16
Sukanya Kumar.....	20
Janani Venkateswaran.....	25
V.   CONCLUSION.....	29
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	31

## ABSTRACT

One significant way to distinguish a culture is through its performance arts. In regards to South Asia, general misconceptions and orientalist stereotypes from the West reduce South Asian dance to a form of entertainment and place it at the forefront of South Asian identity. However, from a South Asian perspective, dance plays a key role in the preservation of cultural history and ancient tradition. Therefore, if a particular dance represents the homeland, what then does the dancer represent? How does their act of dancing symbolize the performance of the homeland and what does it mean when they perform it outside of the nation's borders? One particular classical South Asian dance that allows for such analysis is *Bharatanatyam*.

Originally called *Sadir*, this ancient South Indian dance narrated Hindu mythology and folklore and was exclusively performed by a community known as the *Devadasis*, or “servants of the gods.” The Devadasis, who consisted of both women *and* men, were married to the main god or goddess of their local temple and were dutifully bound to perform Sadir for their deity spouse. They were considered one of the closest forms a human could reach to divinity and as a result, held a high social class standing. As they became a liaison between humanity and the heavens, the Devadasis were also socially honored courtesans who, with their own agency, exchanged sexual services as well. Because of this, during the British Raj, colonial officials led a campaign to socially and politically stigmatize the dance to economically degrade the dancers, making them more accessible for the British garrisons. After India's independence, the new Indian upper class codified the erasure of the Devadasi community, while Indian and Tamil Sri Lankan artists reclaimed and appropriated Sadir, transforming it into the Bharatanatyam of today.

After more than seventy years since the legal prohibition of the Devadasi system, dancers from various backgrounds perform Bharatanatyam all over the world today. Since this dance has such a controversial history, or *herstory*, its modern performance provides opportunities to interrogate the social and political implications surrounding it. Using the concept of *anubhāva*, a Sanskrit word describing the evocation of emotion from performing or experiencing an aesthetic that results in a realization of self-truth, I explore how Bharatanatyam also fosters emotive and conceptual understandings of race, gender, sexuality, and diasporic culture.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, by interviewing three generations of South Indian American women who have different levels of experience with Bharatanatyam, this paper connects how the reclamation of the dance contributes to discourse of identity and *nostalgia without memory* in the South Asian-American diaspora.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> “Anubhāva” has various meanings, this research uses the *Natya Shastra's* theatrical definition of the word.

<sup>2</sup> Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. vol. 1, University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

## PROLOGUE

From ancient folklore, healing rituals, to contemporary interpretations of traditional performances, dance allows for individuals and communities to manifest their cultural subjectivity through various ways. In the year 2000, six Sri Lankan families, including my own, fled our home island during the peak of the war to settle into Lake Forest, California. Our small Sri Lankan-American community was born here, but while the parents had to learn how to adapt and hybridize their established Sri Lankan identities into American society, their 1.5-generation children had to learn Sri Lankan *and* American culture altogether. One of the most significant ways our parents taught us about Sri Lankan heritage was through dance. I was only two years-old when we arrived, so growing up in the United States, dance was my gateway to South Asia.

Despite our small Lake Forest community, our parents connected with the greater Southern California Sri Lankan population to launch an annual celebration of Sinhala and Tamil New Year in 2002 at our apartment complex's community center. Though these celebrations consisted of games, cricket matches, and food, the festivities started with youth dance performances. In preparation for this, our families would convene at one of our small apartments to teach us various Sri Lankan dance styles and interpretations of folk songs that they themselves never had to dance growing up on the island. Their sometimes forced need to have us perform our culture was my introduction to experiencing *nostalgia without memory*. The "without" in "nostalgia without memory" characterizes the 1.5-generation Sri Lankan-American youth. In respect to our parents, the "without" characterizes their *imagined nostalgia* of pre-colonial, colonial, pre-war, and post-war Sri Lanka. Their need to see their children perform the Sri Lankan homeland through dance was not just an affective site for them, rather, it is now the reason why I pursue my research.

Of the many dance styles unique to South Asia more broadly, I choose to study the South Indian and North Sri Lankan dance known as *Bharatanatyam*. I focus on Bharatanatyam because personally, this was a dance style that I was drawn to at a young age. When I was ten years-old and my sister fourteen, my parents enrolled her into Bharatanatyam classes in Mission Viejo, California. I also wanted to enroll in the classes with my sister. Unfortunately, I recall my father not letting me, because it was "too feminine" in his opinion, and therefore, I was placed into Tae Kwon Do, for which I now have a black belt. Because of this, my sister actually secretly taught me some of the repertoires and *abhinaya*, or facial gestures, she learned in class. Then, when I was alone, I would perform in front of a mirror for myself. Though I did not know what I was actively doing at the time, I can now confidently infer that it was a way I could comfortably explore and channel different forms of gender expressions, which was not socially "acceptable" nor accessible for me to do in the outside world. I would also like to think of it now as a way I

practiced a form of decolonization, for which I unknowingly connected with the Devadasis who once thrived in a much less heteronormative space. Moreover, this was how I used Bharatanatyam to practice a nostalgia without memory, and the transient experience of dance, or *anubhāva*, I felt while doing this helped me transcend time and space to feel free.

I only learned of the colonial subjugation of the Devadasis and the eradication of Sadir, Bharatanatyam's ancestor, during my undergraduate studies at the University of California, Irvine in a class titled "South Asian American Experiences." In addition to learning this *herstory*, I was also introduced to the term *nostalgia without memory* in this class. Learning this theory, in a way, was a form of *anubhāva* for me because it made me instantly think of the connections I have just previously made clear in this prologue. More importantly, this gave me the opportunity to regard my personal experience and validate it with a broader network of South Asian-American diasporic experiences.

Given Bharatanatyam's controversial history, or *herstory*, and provided that it serves as an affective gateway to the homeland, my research explores the nuances of this art form and how it manifests in the South Asian-American diaspora. More specifically, I have chosen to interview three South Indian Tamil women for my documentary, each of whom differ in generation and Bharatanatyam experience, because they reflect the demographic identities of the Devadasis. Lastly, I use the medium of documentary film for my research to enhance the access to an *anubhāva* experience while interacting with my work.

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Rasa* is a Sanskrit term from the *Natya Shastra*, the ancient Indian treatise of performing arts written by the sage, Bharata Muni. *Rasa*, which translates to “essence,” “sentiment,” and “flavor,” characterizes the relationship between the self and emotions through the *navarasas*, which means “nine emotions.” These nine emotions are: *shringara*, “erotic;” *hasya*, “humor;” *karuna*, “sorrow;” *raudra*, “anger;” *vera*, “heroic;” *bhayanaka*, “fear;” *bibhatsa*, “disgust;” *adbhuta*, “wonder;” *shanta*, “peace.” These rasas are intended to be channelled and evoked in most South Asian dance forms between the dancer and the *rasikas*, or “audience,” through the concept of *anubhāva*. *Anubhāva*, which also derives from the *Natya Shastra*, is the transient moment when the dancer and audience member become one through the performance and are able to connect with the *navarasas*. This *anubhāva* connection manifests differently through each individual and is determined by their unique human experiences; therefore, their memories. However, what happens when an *anubhāva* metaphysically transports an individual through time and space using memories they have not ever experienced? Using Arjun Appadurai’s concept of *nostalgia without memory* from his book *Modernity at Large*, I ascribe this transient phenomenon of dance to the dilemma of diasporic subjects in searching for their identity and homeland.<sup>3</sup> I explore this argument by surveying the South Indian and North Sri Lankan dance form, *Bharatanatyam*. Because of its attempted erasure under British colonialism and its modern performance around the world, I argue that *Bharatanatyam* also represents a form of resistance. Therefore, given the policing of this dance form, I ask how *Bharatanatyam* dancers continue its legacy of activism and how the dance makes connections between the present with the past and

---

<sup>3</sup> Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. vol. 1, University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

the diaspora with the homeland through anubhāva. I observe these questions by interviewing three South Indian female Bharatanatyam dancers who each vary in age generation and level of practice experience. My work is compiled in a documentary film to enhance access to anubhāva, and I recommend readers to watch it at [bit.ly/Anubhava](https://bit.ly/Anubhava) before reading section IV.



## II. *HER*STORY & ORIGINIS

The word *Bharatanatyam* can be broken down into six parts. *Bharata* translates to “India” and *natyam* means “dance” in many South Asian languages. Bharata Muni is also the Indian theologian credited with writing the *Natya Shastra*, the great treatise of dance and the performance arts, in some period between 200 BCE to 200 CE.<sup>4</sup> *Bharata* is also broken down as a mnemonic for “**bhava**,” “**raga**,” and “**tala**,” which respectively translate to “feelings,” “melody,” and “rhythm.” Therefore, Bharatanatyam can be understood as “the dance of India,” “the dance of Bharata,” and/or “the dance of feelings, melody, and rhythm.” Contrary to popular belief, Bharatanatyam is actually considered a more “modern” early 20<sup>th</sup>-century dance form, but its roots are traced back two milleniums in an ancient dance practice called *Sadir*.

The Chola Empire was one of the oldest dynasties in world history, spanning from the 4th Century BCE to the 13th Century CE. The empire ruled over modern-day India, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia and expanded its borders through the promotion of arts and *Shaivism*, which is the Brahmanic worship of the Hindu god Shiva. According to Hindu mythology, Earth used to be inhabited by demons, but Shiva performed his “dance of creation” to destroy the old demon world so that Brahma, the God of Creation, could create our current one. Because of his dance, Shiva became *Nataraja*, or “Lord of Dance,” making him the manifestation of Indian dance and an allegory for rebirth. What is noteworthy about this legend is that it establishes the performance of dance and the creation of the universe as a form of warfare and resistance against evil at its very roots.

---

<sup>4</sup> Shruti Das. *Ancient Indian Dramaturgy: A Historical Overview of Bharata's Natya Shastra*. vol. 3, issue III, Research Scholar - An International Refereed Journal of Literary Explorations, 2015.

Using this story, the Shavist sage Bharata Muni used the *Natya Veda*, which is the last of five Hindu scriptures, to write the *Natya Shastra* - the great treatise of music, dance, and performance. The *Natya Shastra* details every imaginable aspect of the performance arts including costumes, makeup, setting, audience, choreography and repertoire, and even how to feel when dancing or spectating. This is when *Sadir*, or “temple dance,” was created and established as the oldest organized Indian dance practice. Like most South Asian aesthetic forms, *Sadir* developed as a practice of religious devotion; only, a community known as the *Devadasis*, or “servants of the gods,” were allowed to perform it. The *Devadasis*, comprised of binary and nonbinary womxn, were individuals chosen to marry a particular Hindu deity and perform exclusively for them at their particular temple - with their own agency. The *Devadasis* were highly educated and also served as advisors to the kings, but because of their role in religious worship, they were even characterized as the closest a human could reach to become divine.<sup>5</sup>

The status of *Devadasis* shifted under British imperial rule. Stationed in India during the 19th century, British garrisons were incensed that they could not afford the sexual services of the *Devadasis*; the resistance of the *Devadasis* in making their bodies available to British soldiers became a problem for the British officials higher in command. British officials and Christian missionaries already viewed the *Devadasis* as a threat to their alleged superiority because of the power *Sadir* had in preserving ancient Indian cultural heritage and non-Christian philosophies. Consequently, in 1892, the British Raj launched the Anti-Nautch Movement, which sought to socially degrade the *Devadasis* by portraying their dances as hypersexual and overly erotic,

---

<sup>5</sup> For the full history of the *Devadasi* and *Sadir*-banning to the reinvention of Bharatanatyam, see: Hari Krishnan, “Bharatanatyam: Teacher’s Guide,” *Accelerated Motion: Bodies and Society*, Website sponsored by Wesleyan University Press. [www.oberlinlibstaff.com/acceleratedmotion/dancehistory/bharatanatyam/section5.php](http://www.oberlinlibstaff.com/acceleratedmotion/dancehistory/bharatanatyam/section5.php).

suggesting that even “looking at an Indian dance was sufficient to arouse unchristian feelings.”<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, this movement singled out the Devadasis as “prostitutes” and used this criminalization of sexuality to legitimize British imperialism, turning the Indian upper class against the once-respected Devadasi community. Because this social stigmatization was so harsh, the Devadasis could no longer provide for themselves through Sadir, or even partake in Hindu traditions more broadly. As a result, they were forced into sex work without the agency they once had, allowing the British troops to placate their sexual conquest over the “exotic oriental dancing girl.”<sup>7</sup> With their status as prostitutes now cemented, the British passed the Madras Presidency Temple Dance Prohibition in 1910, legally banning Sadir and codifying the social degradation of the Devadasis.

Indian nationalists were angered by the loss of “their” dance, but counterproductively, they blamed the Devadasis for it, internalizing the British constructed link between Sadir and prostitution. Therefore, months after India’s independence, Indian officials passed the 1947 Madras Devadasis Prevention of Dedication Act, legally establishing the Devadasis as criminal and ending their 2,000-year tradition for good. Though this act “re-legalized” the dance, the Indian upper class appropriated it to claim the dance for themselves, celebrating it for its cultural significance while leaving the remaining Devadasis in extreme poverty in the newly created nation and erasing their *herstory* of preserving the dance during the two millenniums prior.<sup>8</sup> Subsequently, many artists tried to “sanctify” the dance form in order for it to stay alive in some way post-Indian independence. Such innovative dancers include: Rukmini Devi Arundale, who

---

<sup>6</sup> Davi Courtney, *The Tawaif, The Anti-Nautch Movement, and the Development of North Indian Classical Music* [www.chandrakantha.com/articles/tawaif/5\\_anti\\_nautch\\_movement.html](http://www.chandrakantha.com/articles/tawaif/5_anti_nautch_movement.html)

<sup>7</sup> Mytheli Sreenivas, *Creating Conjugal Subjects: Devadasis and the Politics of Marriage in Colonial Madras Presidency*, *Feminist Studies* 37:1 (Spring 2011) 63-92.

<sup>8</sup> For the full Prevention Act, see: [www.lawsofindia.org/pdf/tamil\\_nadu/1947/1947TN31.pdf](http://www.lawsofindia.org/pdf/tamil_nadu/1947/1947TN31.pdf).

established *Kalakshetra*, one of the most prominent Bharatanatyam dance schools; E. Krishna Iyer, a male artist who campaigned against the dance stigmas; Balasaraswati, who introduced and performed Bharatanatyam around the world; and Kalanidhi Narayanan, who brought back the “erotic” shringara aspects of Sadir.<sup>9</sup> Today, people of all ethnic backgrounds, gender identities, sexualities, and religions perform Bharatanatyam around the world.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Ashish Khokar. *E. Krishna Iyer: Bharatanatyam's Guardian Angel*. The Hindu, 9 Aug. 2018 and Veejay Sai. *A Tribute to Kalanidhi Narayanan*. The News Minute, 1 Mar. 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Sara Azzarelli. *Dancing Across Gender Boundaries: An Exploration on the Process of Gender Identity Construction through the Indian Classical Dance Bharatanatyam*, Acta Ethnographica Hungarica 60:1. 2015. and Sara Azzarelli. *Queering My Mudra: An Exploration on the Role of Bharatanatyam in the Activism of an Indian Queer Group*, Motio: Postgraduate Journal for Dance Practice and Research. 2015. and “Revelations: Celebrating LGBTQ Stories Through Bharathanatyam Dance.” *YouTube*, uploaded by IndianRaga, 30 November 2017, <https://youtu.be/zLCK1dmn2qc>.

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The two main theoretical concepts that frame both my decision to conduct this research through documentary film and my analyses of these interviews are *anubhāva* and *nostalgia without memory*. In numerous South Asian languages, *anubhāva* literally means “experience,” but in the *Natya Shastra*, Bharata Muni describes *anubhāva* as the goal each performer of Indian dance must achieve. It is the moment during the performance where the dancer and the audience member become one through the dance form and are able to connect with *it* in various ways. I emphasize “it” because I argue that in the South Asian diaspora, the *anubhāva* of dancing or spectating a Bharatanatyam performance can result in a connection to an imagined homeland and an imagined past. For 1.5 or second-generation subjects, this is where *nostalgia without memory* applies. In his book, *Modernity At Large*, Arjun Appadurai narrates the concept of *globalization* through the voice of *modernity* in order to introduce *nostalgia without memory*.<sup>11</sup> He states, “We cannot simplify matters by imagining that the global is to space what the modern is to time. For many societies, modernity is an elsewhere just as the global is a temporal wave that must be encountered in their present.”<sup>12</sup> Appadurai articulates these concepts as mobile and versatile, deconstructing the measurement of “authenticity” as it relates to how diasporic individuals practice their respective cultures. Through his anthro-ethnographic lens, by using cultural productions that provide narratives of globalization, he also suggests that the term *cultural* implies “difference,” and therefore, the production of any “imagined” culture is one developed by a privileging of what is *not* “culture.” Through his discussion of what “is” and what “is not,” in regards to imagined cultures, Arjun Appadurai introduces a new concept called, *imagined*

---

<sup>11</sup> Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Vol. 1, University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 9.

*nostalgia* in his chapter, “Consumption, Duration, and History.”<sup>13</sup> He defines *imagined nostalgia* as “nostalgia for things that never were” and relates it to consumerism; therefore globalization, by stating, “The pleasure that has been inculcated into the subjects who act as modern consumers is to be found in the tension between nostalgia and fantasy, where the present is represented as if it were already past.”<sup>14</sup> In his chapter, “The Production of Locality,” Appadurai discusses the flows of global cultures and examines locality as relational and contextual instead of scalar or spatial.<sup>15</sup> He states, “space and time are themselves socialized and localized through complex and deliberate practices of performance, representation, and action,” revealing how individual and community subject-formation necessitates imagined nostalgia.<sup>16</sup> Though my research focuses on 1.5 or second-generation diasporic subjects, I also note that even older Bharatanatyam practitioners who dance in India can feel a sense of nostalgia without memory, if the pre-colonial Sadir and Devadasi era is one which they seek to access as they perform.

Using Arjun Appadurai’s concepts, Jessica Marie Falcone applies them to a Gujarati harvest dance, known as Garba-raas, in order to further problematize the very notions of “authenticity” in her article, “Garba with Attitude.”<sup>17</sup> Falcone attributes the reinterpretation of Garba-raas in the United States by second-generation Gujarati Indian immigrants as a form of nostalgia without memory. In order to understand this, it is important to emphasize that the second and “1.5,”-generations are the subjects of her claim since the older first-generation is assumed to have experienced this cultural tradition in the homeland, making it simply

---

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 66.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 77, 83.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 178.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 180.

<sup>17</sup> Jessica Marie Falcone. *Garba With Attitude: Creative Nostalgia in Competitive Collegiate Gujarati American Folk Dancing*. Project MUSE, Journal of Asian American Studies, vol. 16 no. 1, 2013.

“nostalgia” for them. Thus, this intercollegiate Garba-raas becomes a reimagination just as well it is a reinterpretation or cultural translation of the existing ancient festivity. By referencing Chandralekha, a renowned, classically trained Bharatanatyam dancer, Falcone notes the role change plays in preservation, quoting “[t]he task of the artist is to modernize the tradition through the creative process, since traditional dance is not a museum piece or fossil form hermetically sealed forever.”<sup>18</sup> In addition to these technicalities, this concept of nostalgia without memory has a deeper, more poignant layer that seeks to understand why reimagined cultural practices need to be formed. Though this depends on the individual, the reasons that stand out include guilt, obligation, and search for identity, although as Falcone points out, “The act of remembering what one has never known is akin to Baudrillard’s ‘precession of simulacra,’ in which the copy has no original.”<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, the more globalized the world becomes, the more apparent the disparities between cultural dance performance in the homeland are with that of the diaspora.

The tensions between “tradition” and modernity regarding authenticity now invoke the idea of the *hyperreal*, which Jean Baudrillard coined and defines as “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality.”<sup>20</sup> This notion also takes into account how since Garba already changes so much over time in India alone, it is now difficult to distinguish it from intercollegiate Garba in the diaspora and categorize either as the most “real.” The reluctance to fully embrace one’s “original” cultural practices as a second-generation subject results from the need to accommodate oneself to and/or with the dominant culture they live in - as a means of survival and not necessarily submission. As a result, these “hybrid” exhibitions of culture are not only

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 66-67.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 66.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra And Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

expected but are also unavoidable. Lastly, Jessica Falcone quotes Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin, indicating how “tradition is a process of interpretation, attributing meaning in the present through making reference to the past.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, this recognizes that culture can make people, but more importantly, it suggests that people have the ability to make and change culture.

In order for dancers to change culture through nostalgia without memory, they must use *anubhāva*. The concept of *anubhāva* as it relates to dance and the South Asian diaspora is surveyed in Ketu Katrak’s book, *Contemporary Indian Dance: New Creative Choreography in India and the Diaspora*.<sup>22</sup> In her explorative text, she places the past, present, and “in-between” into conversation regarding dance “authenticity” and “tradition” to validate the ever-changing nature of artistic practices. Katrak narrates the pre-colonial history of Sadir and the Devadasis, introducing their subjugation through the British Raj-imposed laws and regulations. Her book chronologically draws upon the works of Indian dancers who, since Indian independence, have paved new ways in dance choreography *and* philosophy. Similar to Jessica Falcone, Katrak references Chandralekha throughout her text. By quoting the pioneering artist, Katrak reflects on the question, “why have Indian dancers ‘become insular and unresponsive to the dramatic social, historical, scientific, human changes that have occurred in the world during the past thirty years? What makes them resistant to contemporary progressive values?’”<sup>23</sup> This sets the theme of Katrak’s book, and because of this, she offers an alternative approach to theoretical work by using creative productions to analyze theories of “progressive values” and not the other way

---

<sup>21</sup> Jessica Marie Falcone. *Garba With Attitude: Creative Nostalgia in Competitive Collegiate Gujarati American Folk Dancing*. Project MUSE, Journal of Asian American Studies, vol. 16 no. 1, 2013. pp. 60.

<sup>22</sup> Ketu Katrak. *Contemporary Indian Dance: New Creative Choreography in India and the Diaspora*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 9.



around. More specifically, she uses implications of the dancing body and the South Asian dance term *rasa*, which describes nine emotions or feelings that dancers can channel to achieve an *anubhāva*, in order to suggest affect *is* theory; therefore, a site of legitimate knowledge.

Katrak's book begins with a memorial for her own Bharatanatyam guru, the late Medha Yodh, detailing her influence on Katrak personally and the contents of her book. Katrak also evokes her own experience learning Bharatanatyam later on in her text to emphasize the relationship between a guru and the student, creating an allegory for the past and present. This articulation and similar reflections from my own interview subjects reveal to me that gurus present another site of nostalgia and an alternate familial genealogy for dancers as well. Therefore, similar to Appadurai, Katrak privileges temporality as a meter for dance authenticity, but positions it within a geographical location in order to complicate the notion of modernity as existing on a linear scale. By channeling the Devadasis of the past and by surveying dancers of the present, who uniquely differ in their own ways, Katrak suggests that there never was an "authentic" dance form. Moreover, dance itself should be characterized in terms of when and where it developed only in order to reference their social and political environments - not to measure its authenticity.

Mainstream dance discourse in the West has limited this performance art to an aesthetic, thereby using regressive, orientalist tropes to classify Bharatanatyam as an "exotic" form of entertainment. Using the concept of dance as mere aesthetic, therefore, a "beauty," we can examine the implications it has on South Asian women. In Vanita Reddy's book, *Fashioning Diaspora: Beauty Femininity, and South Asian American Culture*, she states, "Given the centrality of femininity and racial difference to genealogies of the fetish, popular understandings

of racialized feminine beauty tend merely to reinforce their fetishistic associations with objectification and commodification.”<sup>24</sup> Due to the British colonial hypersexualization of the Devadasi community and the resulting criminalization of their dance, Reddy’s statement complicates the perception of Bharatanatyam as a medium for the performance of gender through beauty and therefore, a way to conceptualize larger institutional power dynamics. Furthermore, the performance of *modern* Bharatanatyam has been characterized by dancers, themselves, as intentionally *less* “erotic” than the Sadir dance of the Devadasis, suggesting that the level of sexual expression can also determine the dance’s authenticity. Moreover, this legitimizes the need for scholarship that prioritizes the individual dancer, challenging the essentializing notions and binaries of “traditional” vs “non-traditional” and “authentic” vs “inauthentic.”

What introduced me to my eldest interview subject and also challenged me to think about how the production of affect in the diaspora serves as a form of labor is Priya Srinivasan’s book, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor*.<sup>25</sup> In her text, Srinivasan examines the role of Bharatanatyam in the Americas, or “nautch dancing” as it was described in the United States during the 1900s, and connects it to the work of Indian-American dancers today. Using archival material of newspaper headlines and reviews of performances from P.T. Barnum and Ruth St. Denis in the early twentieth century, Srinivasan brings to attention the contrast in reception to Bharatanatyam dance when performed by three South Indian Devadasis versus St. Denis’ white body. Srinivasan states, “Studying performances and female Indian dancing bodies creates an opportunity to view how the American public negotiated the racial ambiguity of Indian bodies

---

<sup>24</sup> Vanita Reddy. *Fashioning Diaspora: Beauty, Femininity, and South Asian American Culture*. American Literatures Initiative, 2016. pp.17.

<sup>25</sup> Priya Srinivasan. *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor*. Temple University Press, 2012.

and reconciled questions of race and gender pertaining to Indians preceding the federal ruling of 1923.”<sup>26</sup> The “federal ruling of 1923” refers to the *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, which confirmed the ineligibility for naturalization of Indians in the United States. Srinivasan’s analysis, therefore, becomes an interesting and important perspective to understand how American expectations of Indian femininity through dance created a way to further other and alienate South Asian migrants more broadly. Her analysis also reveals the literal ways in which three South Indian women have been erased from history, as she states, “if white women could be more erotic in brownface, what was the need for nautch girls?”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, this is where she makes the connection between past, present, and the “in-between” because she uses the modern performance and instruction of Bharatanatyam, specifically by guru Ramya Harishankar, to interpret the role of the Indian diasporic female dancer as laboring to pay homage to the invisibilized Devadasis. Additionally, Srinivasan self-interrogates her argument by referencing the Indian elite who, directly after independence, banned the Devadasis but kept the dance. She states, “Effectively, dancing women bore the brunt of nationalist negotiations with colonialist ideals, through which, ironically, the agendas of empire and nationhood became identical. Although the dancing women were not valued, their dances were.”<sup>28</sup> This powerful quote ties together her theme and endeavor to understand where Indian practitioners of Bharatanatyam belong, not only physically but also in history and our memories.

Using the concepts of nostalgia as discussed prior, Srinivasan makes an affective connection between the dancers of the past and herself by explaining her own journey in discovering a photo of three Devadasis, which is also the cover of her book. The theme of affect

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 45.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 58.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 70.

is abundant throughout her text and poignantly exists to emphasize the inextricable nature of past and present. These themes also reflect Ketu Katrak's emphasis of the emotive rasas, which also help radically reinterpret Indian dance theory *through* Indian dance terms. Having danced herself and been taught by a queer Southeast Asian male guru in Australia, Srinivasan also conceptualizes the ability for Bharatanatyam to reconstruct gender and "nation" through the performance of Indian mythology and folklore. She states, "The dancer's understandings of her body change, and she becomes able to portray both femininity and masculinity fluidly."<sup>29</sup> Through these frameworks, Srinivasan suggests that dance is one, a labor that is imposed on newer generations of South Asian dancers to revisibilize the lost herstories of the Devadasis, and two, a way in which the bounds of gender and heteronormative roles can be institutionally deconstructed and individualistically reconstructed. Each dancer I interviewed for my documentary contributes to this endeavor in her own unique way; please watch the documentary film at [bit.ly/Anubhava](http://bit.ly/Anubhava) before proceeding to the next section.

---

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 31.

#### **IV. INTERVIEW ANALYSES**

For this project, I interviewed three Indian Tamil women who currently live in California; they are each at different age generations and have varying levels of experience with Bharatanatyam. I chose this relationship to explore how the dancers offer insight into their personal anubhāva experiences through their respective pursuits of Bharatanatyam and the way they navigate their hybrid identities living in the South Asian-American diaspora. I have only had slight interactions with each of the interview subjects prior to developing this project, whereas the dancers themselves were more acquainted with each other. However, since the process of this documentary was so personal, we all became more familiar with each other, and in order to reflect the intimacy of this work, I refer to my interview contributors by their first names in my analyses. Each interview also took place in the comfort of their own homes and lasted around an hour each, with questions that flowed conversationally without any responses scripted prior. However, before interviewing these artists, I did provide them with a list of my themes of anubhāva and nostalgia without memory and also the broader intellectual questions I sought to explore in our interview conversations. To represent the transition from “past” to “present,” I organize my analyses of the dancers in this thesis and introduce them in the documentary film from oldest to youngest and, respectively, most to least Bharatanatyam experience. In this order, the interview subjects are Ramya Harishankar, Sukanya Kumar, and Janani Venkateswaran.

## **Ramya Harishankar**

My first interviewee is the world-renowned Bharatanatyam practitioner and guru, Ramya Harishankar.<sup>30</sup> Ramya has been dancing Bharatanatyam for over 55 years and this year marks her thirtieth year of teaching in Irvine through her own *Arpana Dance Company*. Growing up in Delhi, her mother was passionate about the arts, so she enrolled Ramya in Bharatanatyam classes when she was only six years-old under the instruction of her first guru, the late K.N. Dakshinamurthy. Ramya could not yet see dance as a career nor even a full passion during this period, but she moved to Madras, now Chennai, to live with her grandmother and continue her dance mentorship with the late Swamimalai K. Rajaratnam Pillai. Both of Ramya's male gurus were part of the Devadasi community, but it wasn't until after college when she continued her dance journey under the late Kalanidhi Narayanan, a non-Devadasi, that she saw dance as a potential career and true passion of hers. Though Narayanan was not a Devadasi, she was one of the first artists to reintroduce the "controversial," "erotic" Sadir repertoires into Bharatanatyam through the innovation of *abhinaya*, which is the aspect of dance that involves expressing various rasa through facial gesture to evoke an *anubhāva*. Narayanan was credited as one of the leading exponents of *abhinaya*. Through her guidance, Ramya felt a greater connection to and appreciation for Bharatanatyam.

Ramya Harishankar now continues her late guru's legacy as a leading proponent of *abhinaya*, so much so that some dancers move to the United States from India to learn it under her guruship. Ramya reflects on her introduction to *abhinaya* in our interview stating, "It just clicked with me at that point, and I just found a voice through *abhinaya*. I mean it really turned

---

<sup>30</sup> Gunindu Abeysekera. Personal Interview of Ramya Harishankar. 28 March 2019.

me on to dance, and I just wanted to do that. I should say it was *abhinaya* that really inspired and motivated me to take on dance full time.” She explains further stating, “I always was a dreamer, and I think to me, [*abhinaya*] provided a voice to say things that I would probably never have the guts to say in real life, to *be* something other than myself, to play a role, so to speak.” She clarifies that, from her perspective, even when a dancer takes on the role of a character in a dance piece, whether it’s an unspecified character or one known to many audiences like a deity, one still plays the role of oneself. Her mention of a role prompted me to ask what she believes *her* duty is as a Bharatanatyam dancer and guru within the context of living and teaching in the diaspora. She responded, “As a teacher, I’ve certainly taken on the role of a cultural ambassador in a way and made sure that I’m committed to giving the best of whatever I know and whatever I have learned over the years to my students.” Interestingly, she does not merely consider her role as a “cultural ambassador” of Indian arts in the United States for *just* non-Indian communities but also to her own students. She states, “Living abroad, it’s very very difficult because first of all, we get students from all different parts of India and parts of the world; we’re not dealing just with South Indians who have a cultural history with Bharatanatyam.” However, even with regard to her students who *are* South Indian, she notes that most of them “have no exposure to their history, to their culture, to their music, to *nothing*, so it’s like leading the *blind* in many ways, and we have to be doing a lot more than just teaching movement.” In this regard, she recognizes that this nostalgia without memory can also be a burden for dedicated artists and gurus like herself. She laughs and states, “so it’s a pretty important job, I think.” In her book *Sweating Saris*, Priya Srinivasan actually collaborates with Ramya to suggest that the work of Bharatanatyam dancers in the diaspora *is* a form of necessary labor. Through this lens, Ramya’s

comments in our interview underscore that her regard towards the importance of dance instruction is more than just personal; it is for future generations of South Asian artists around the world.

My interview with Ramya Harishankar revealed to me that one of the most effective ways any guship becomes successful is when the mentor hands down the affect of their lived nostalgia to empower their students through a nostalgia without memory. She reminds her students every step of the way how she had to “beg and plead with our gurus, nothing was ever given away. You had to want to do it. Like *really* want it.” Her ruminations of her own Bharatanatyam journey were indeed nostalgic for her. She even poignantly reflects on moments where she dreaded practicing the difficult *aramandi* pose, the half-sitting pose with a deep knee bend, getting scolded by her more strict gurus, and traveling long distances for class every day by using public transportation alone at age eight. However, she uses these memories to both encourage her students to always be grateful for the dancers of the past that have preserved and nurtured the form over the years and to instill dedication and perseverance in her students. She concludes our conversation by stating she tells her students, “I’m not preparing you to dance for the audiences here, I’m always preparing you to dance for my gurus. If my gurus were alive and here, I want them to say ‘Wow you’ve done a good job, you’ve taught them well.’” Despite the fact that Ramya learned Bharatanatyam in India, she still has a nostalgia without memory from her gurus for an era prior to the policing of the Devadasis and Sadir. Therefore, now Ramya’s students receive a nostalgia without memory of a time in which dance began to radically “evolve” in order to survive. Consequently, though Ramya has learned Bharatanatyam at its early roots, her understanding of the many layers of dance evolution and memory motivate her



principles. She states, “As a living and breathing tradition, Bharatanatyam has to evolve, otherwise it will just remain a museum piece.”

Ramya actively stresses this lineage in each of the performances she organizes to instill a nostalgia without memory in her audiences even prior to its start, preparing their spectative *anubhāva* to be more impactful and transient - temporally and geographically. I met Ramya in the summer of 2018 while attending her series of *Arangetrams*, which are the “graduation” ceremonies of Bharatanatyam students that honor their debut solo on-stage performance. During each *Arangetram*, she introduces the ceremony to the audience with Sadir’s colonial history and her own dance journey to illustrate the symbolism of an *Arangetram* in the diaspora. For all *Arangetrams*, Ramya choreographs the two-hour performance for each individual student based off their personalities. Similar to her statement regarding playing the role of oneself when performing, Ramya encourages her students to find individuality through the dance form, providing them with opportunities to innovate it in ways unique to them. Harkening back to her emphasis of being dedicated to Bharatanatyam every step of the way, the *Arangetrams* are both emotionally and physically challenging and also financially demanding for the families. Additionally, the last student’s *Arangetram* Ramya conducted that summer was very special for her because she had choreographed this same student’s mother’s *Arangetram* thirty years prior on the same day. For the final dance piece of this *Arangetram*, she surprised the audience by choreographing a duet performance between the daughter and her mother, allowing the audience to share in Ramya’s own nostalgia of achieving such a milestone in her career. This marked Ramya’s first multi-generational *Arangetram*, something that not many dance gurus can say they’ve experienced. I asked her how she felt during this experience and she stated, “It made me

feel old but was fulfilling for me, because it made me reflect on how many dancers I've mentored over the years and made me happy to think I've been able to instill in them some love for the dance and their culture in some way or another. I'm happy to do what I love doing, I can't complain."

### **Sukanya Kumar**

My second interviewee is 28-year old Indian classical artist, innovator, and academic, Sukanya Kumar.<sup>31</sup> Born in Mumbai, Sukanya was introduced to Bharatanatyam while accompanying her cousins to their dance classes when she was only three years-old. Though she does not come from a family of dancers or musicians, it was still her mother who saw her daughter's early interest in Bharatanatyam and enrolled her in the same classes under Sukanya's first guru, Shalini Natarajan. During this time and now under the guruship of Mahalingam Pillai, a young Sukanya performed on stage for the first time for Pillai's eightieth birthday. In her interview, she shared with me how she often reflects upon a photograph she has from the end of this performance, where she is depicted hugging her guru, stating, "it's so etched in memory, that moment is when I really felt that connection with art and artists of my lineage." Later on under Pillai's guidance for her own *Arangetram*, Sukanya stressed that it was an incredibly challenging experience. She was very sick at the time, so her mother urged guru Pillai to postpone her daughter's *Arangetram*. Pillai responded saying that it is bad luck to postpone a ceremony like this and that if you postpone it once, it will eventually never happen. They proceeded with the *Arangetram*, and on that day Sukanya had to leave the stage after each segment to wear a respirator and come back to perform again. The day after the ceremony and per tradition, she

---

<sup>31</sup> Gunindu Abeysekera. Personal Interview of Sukanya Kumar. 11 April 2019.

visited her guru's home where he gifted her a bronze Nataraja statue, which she gestures to behind her in our interview. She states, "He gave me that, and he said, 'keep up the name of the institution,' and that was the last words I ever spoke to him. My *Arangetram* was on the 22nd of November and he passed away on December 6th, so that was the last *Arangetram* he was alive for." She emphasizes that because of this experience, her *Arangetram* was and still is a very impactful moment for her, stating, "I truly felt that you can dance no matter what, and it was not me dancing that day. It was the art itself. It was the power of the universe. I was just the vessel."

Similar to Ramya Harishankar who had moved from Delhi to Chennai, or Madras at the time, Sukanya also gained a larger passion for Bharatanatyam after moving there. Sukanya moved to Chennai to pursue an education in film where she was also introduced to her current guru, Priyadarshini Govind, who also happened to attend dance classes with Ramya when they were both students of Kanandhi Narayanan many years prior. Sukanya stated that after meeting Govind, "It was an overnight change where I realized that this is what I want to be. If I am going to be somebody, I want to be a performer." Through this mentorship Sukanya found her own personal role and the role of Bharatanatyam in general as a form of education and knowledge for the world. She states, "I really liked the dynamics, the continuous process of sharing what you have, taking what you don't. It's a very good 'give and take' relationship that art offers to you in general, and that's what made me pursue dance as a career." Like Ramya Harishankar, Sukanya's relationship with her gurus foster alternative genealogies and forms of kinship relationships. A few years later, Sukanya also joined the guidance of Kanandhi Narayanan herself in order to study *abhinaya* under her discipline. Sukanya's experience with Narayanan is noteworthy, because she considers her as her "dance mother." In the interview, Sukanya also cites how she

was inspired by Narayanan for taking the risk of reintroducing the *shringara* or “erotic” aspects of the dance form into the Bharatanatyam repertoire. Sukanya explains that Narayanan's efforts motivate her to conclude that each generation of dancers has to do what they must in order to keep the form alive. She states, “I think now it's our turn. Our generation *has* to realize and understand how the dance *needs* to be modified. And when I say modified, I don't necessarily mean that ‘it is wrong’ and it has been corrected,’ no, what I mean is that it has to *respond* differently.” I apply this explanation to her description of working as the Dance Director for the Clarke School for the Deaf and Blind in Chennai. During her years coordinating recreational programs for youth who are deaf and/or blind in India, she was able to challenge the methods of Bharatanatyam instruction that she had come to realize were exclusive and limiting. She would incorporate practices from rhythm therapy by having her students touch her as she demonstrated certain routines. However, while teaching the *abhinaya* expression for beauty, one of her students asked her “What if I can’t see, what is beauty then?” Sukanya then explained to me, “Questions like these make you realize that we have restricted the art form a lot to what we think is right, but the art form has a lot to offer. Those questions sort of raised methodologies where I could teach using other perspectives.” What Sukanya refers to in regards to what the art form has to offer is the *anubhāva*, and since she has become aware of obstacles in Bharatanatyam that limit access to it, she takes on the role of making the dance universally accessible through the nuances of memory.

For Sukanya, nostalgia is translated into expressions of the contemporary social-political environment around her, and she articulates it through dance for audiences who many not have similar memories. Fittingly, I met Sukanya Kumar at the University of California, Irvine through

the inaugural year of the South Asian Student Union (SASU), which is the culture and activism-oriented student organization that I co-founded. In preparation for our end-of-the-year event, “South Asian Culture Night: Diversity in the Diaspora,” Sukanya introduced herself to me to sign up as a performer for the show, as she believed our values aligned with her dance principles. We were happy to have her participate, and on the day of, her Bharatanatyam performance evoked an *anubhāva* from me that I did not experience since perhaps a decade prior. She performed an *Ardhanarishvara*, which is a dance piece dedicated to the gender-fluid Hindu deity of the same name and is another form of Shiva. She explained that her piece was a way for her to challenge herself *and* her audiences in their perceptions of gender and sexuality. Therefore, she uses Sadir’s “erotic” or *shringara* repertoires of the male and female not to express sexual desire here, but rather, to express the duality of both feminine and masculine energies and question heteronormativity. She also explores gender perceptions in a dance performance she specifically choreographed for this documentary. The song she selected was *Nadhiyae*, or “River,” from a Tamil film song, which is typically not expected in a “traditional” Bharatanatyam performance. She was touched by the lyrics that compared a woman to water, not in terms of the typical metaphors of “delicacy” or “beauty,” but more so for women’s strength, necessity, and power. She states in our interview, “I identify myself as a woman, and I also identify myself as a person in a world that is being polluted.” She explains that dancing to this song makes her feel like she is overcoming the pollution that bodies of water endure, so through the metaphor, she embodies women overcoming the ways patriarchy pollutes our world. She further explored her unique activism through performance in her M.F.A. dance thesis at UC Irvine titled “War by Any Other Name.” Her three-day performances were only two weeks after

our South Asian Culture Night, so since we became acquainted through SASU, I took photographs for her thesis performance. In our interview, Sukanya reflects about this performance and her preparation for it stating, “‘War by Any Other Name’ was a huge step for me towards what I’ve always wanted to do and now wish to do for every performance.” She adds, “The aim of ‘War by Any Other Name’ was to make a social statement about something that affected me personally, being here in the United States, being a student, being a foreigner in this country. I wanted to make a statement about how I feel on a daily basis, and I wanted to use the language that I know best.” Through this performance, Sukanya narrated ancient warfare, the modern refugee crisis, and school shootings in the United States to expose the futility of violence through the language of Bharatanatyam. While audience members checked into her performance, they were asked to write answers on scraps of paper for “what is war good for?” Later during the showcase, Sukanya read their responses aloud, bringing them into the performance through her expressions of fear, helplessness, grief, and anxiety. As a result, this offered audiences an *anubhāva* of hope and unity. The finale to Sukanya’s M.F.A. thesis was a modern interpretation of the last routine of a Bharatanatyam repertoire, the *thillana*. The *thillana* is supposed to bring the whole performance together and Sukanya decided to dance to a poem by Indo-Fijian poet, Pavana Reddy, titled “Remain the Sea.” For Sukanya, dancing to this poem empowers her to think about her homeland and the ways she carries the legacies of Bharatanatyam through performance. The activism of Sukanya’s dance exemplifies the power of *anubhāva* in making audiences aware of and uncomfortable with social issues, encouraging them to imagine and demand social-political-cultural change. The theme that Sukanya Kumar presents throughout her interview and her dance in general can be summed up by her concluding statement, “I feel the

biggest thing that we need to do as dancers, in time, is not be frozen in it. I think the past is your energy; the past is your legacy, it's your knowledge, and the *future* is your opportunity.”

### **Janani Venkateswaran**

My third and final interviewee is 22-year old behavioral psychologist, poet, and beginner Bharatanatyam dancer, Janani Venkateswaran.<sup>32</sup> Growing up in Chennai, India, Janani lived only ten minutes away from one of the most prestigious Bharatanatyam schools, *Kalakshetra*, yet her family was not too keen on her dancing. Instead, Janani followed in her grandfather's footsteps by learning how to sing Carnatic music, a style of music specific to South India that also traditionally accompanies a Bharatanatyam performance. Janani was also involved with *Theatre Nisha*, a Chennai-based drama group that adapted well-known plays to address social issues in contemporary society. Janani reflects on the theater's Founder and Creative Director, V. Balakrishnan, as one of her own gurus. He influenced Janani to think outside of the box to combine her passions for mental health and the performing arts. Because of this, Janani was motivated to pursue this in college and eventually moved to the United States with her family, so she could study psychology and drama at the University of California, Irvine. Although Janani lived in the birthplace of Bharatanatyam, it was her transnational migration which inspired her to pursue the dance form. She noted in our interview that after leaving Chennai, she felt personally obliged to stay in touch with her heritage for herself and not for her parents or anyone else. However, she explains that it was only after gaining new cultural experiences while studying abroad in South Korea which made her question why she was not more persistent in pursuing something she had always wanted to do. When she returned to Irvine from South Korea, she

---

<sup>32</sup> Gunindu Abeysekera. Personal Interview of Janani Venkateswaran. 6 April 2019.

enrolled in Bharatanatyam classes with Ramya Harishankar. This dilemma of the diaspora is the feeling of obligation that characterizes nostalgia without memory and Janani's own personal motivation to pursue this art form.

This collective dilemma of the diaspora manifests at UC Irvine and is one of the reasons we students formed our South Asian Student Union. I met Janani also through SASU but got to know her better after we both contributed to Sukanya Kumar's M.F.A. performance in May 2018. Janani was the lighting technician and writer of various poems that Sukanya danced to in her thesis production. Three months later, for my introductory research, Janani was the one who invited me to attend six *Arangetrams* with her, which were the *Arangetrams* Ramya Harishankar conducted. While we both spent time together at these Bharatanatyam performances, as either collaborators for Sukanya's thesis or just audience members for the *Arangetrams*, we exchanged experiences regarding our anubhāva moments and how our diasporic hybridity was influenced by them and vice versa. For instance, Janani's anubhāva moments inspired her to imagine herself dancing on stage while we both also felt transported to our imagined homeland. In September 2018, Janani and her family moved to Sacramento, which placed another pause in her dance career. However, it provided me with the opportunity to film Janani practice her dance *adavus*, or basic practice steps, in front of the California State Capitol building. I selected this setting to frame Janani's identity as a hybrid subject and to emphasize the contrast between her and the ancient Devadasis who practiced Sadir exclusively at temples. Additionally, it foregrounds the diasporic Indian woman who is now able to freely express her body through Bharatanatyam in front of the symbol of a colonial state, mocking the colonial powers that sought to eradicate the form.



The theme of Janani's interview reflects the dilemma many 1.5 and second-generation diasporic subjects experience, which is finding a sense of belonging to your culture when you are physically distant from it but emotionally close. Janani states in her interview, "Being part of the diaspora, it is very hard because you have the struggle of 'where do I fit in' and 'how much can I claim to be my own?' Even for me, having grown up in India and now having lived here for these many years, do I still find home in India, is it here, what part of my culture am I able to honor, and what do I want to take out of it?" Janani did not realize she was nostalgic for her homeland until she left it, which is more often than not the case, but she remarks that she finds comfort in resolving these anxieties of identity, belonging, and losing memories of the homeland through Bharatanatyam.

For Janani, knowing how other dancers that have more Bharatanatyam experience than she does share similar dilemmas allows her to recognize the individuality in growth and fulfillment through the art form. She reflects on this feeling by detailing her *anubhāva* experiences watching Bharatanatyam as an audience member. She recognizes both Sukanya Kumar and Ramya Harishankar, other celebrated dancers including Rukmini Vijayakumar and Anuradha Venkataraman, and all the young Bharatanatyam dancers whose *Arangetrams* she has attended as highlights of her *anubhāva* moments. She explains that what draws her *anubhāva* in Sukanya, Ramya, Rukmini, and Anuradha's performances are the ways they implement social issues into their pieces, adding that she ends up in tears after each performance. Since Janani was first introduced to performance and mental health both at *Theatre Nisha* in India and at UC Irvine, seeing other artists accomplish this through Bharatanatyam has inspired her. In regards to the young "Arangetrees," Janani states, "When I see young dancers, their energy just gets me.

You can tell when someone loves being somewhere, especially if they love being on stage.” She adds, “Seeing younger performers dance brings a smile to my face, because their enthusiasm and energy are so infectious, you get drawn into that.” She concludes by pointing out how they evoke in her imagination an image of seeing her young self perform on stage. This suggests to me that though she does have lived memories of her homeland to be nostalgic for, it is nostalgia without memory that leads her to wonder what could have been. Nonetheless, Janani acknowledges that she is in no rush to progress as a dancer and will always continue to practice Bharatanatyam for herself and her activism as an aspiring behavioral psychologist.

## V. CONCLUSION

1.5 or second-generation diasporic subjects of any given community may feel a sense of displacement and nostalgia about their homeland. Personally, as a Sri Lankan-American who left my home country at age two, I have always felt this way. Thankfully, I grew up in a diasporic Sri Lankan community where our parents taught their cultures and traditions to their children through the art of dance. Though it wasn't until my undergraduate years when I was introduced to Arjun Appadurai's term *nostalgia without memory*, I have long felt a curious connection to my homeland, even though I have never experienced living there first-hand, because of my exposure to its art form. One such art form was the Bharatanatyam dance style.

Of all the South Asian dance styles I could have chosen to survey diasporic experiences, Bharatanatyam stood out for three main reasons. First, the dance style functions as a live history book, because the repertoire narrates ancient mythology and beliefs. Second, it will always be symbolic of an act of resistance, because the British sought to eradicate the form under colonial rule, and dancers around the world now reclaim it. Third, the core principles of Bharatanatyam performance regard creating a transient moment, or *anubhāva*, for both the dancer and the audience. This transient *anubhāva* allows for dancers and spectators, especially in the diaspora, to reflect on how the role of their culture and its evolution fosters connections to their ancestral homeland. Consequently, these three reasons are precedent for me to ask what are the implications of literally embodying the history of a culture when it was once policed and how can the affect of its performance lead diasporic subjects to transcend time and space?

In order to address my questions and manifest my own nostalgia without memory, I created a documentary film to explore the nuances of the Bharatanatyam art form. I chose the

documentary film medium because if I am suggesting that affect, or *anubhāva*, can serve as an intellectual tool, then film has the ability to enhance the access to *anubhāva*. Additionally, technology's digital spreadability and the use of visual, aural, and textual (subtitles) elements in film allows for greater ease of access to its content. Lastly, the Devadasis were never given a direct opportunity to narrate their own herstories, except through the Sadir dance form, so to redress this, I have interviewed three South Indian female Bharatanatyam dancers who each vary in age generation and level of practice experience. I have individually analyzed my interview conversations in this paper with Ramya Harishankar, Sukanya Kumar, and Janani Venkateswaran, where each artist provides insight into their unique relationship to their homeland through dance. However, collectively, they all express similar perspectives of duty to their ancestral lineage *and* to future generations of dancers on the homeland or throughout the global diaspora.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abeyssekera, Gunindu. Personal Interview of Ramya Harishankar. 28 March 2019.
- Abeyssekera, Gunindu. Personal Interview of Janani Venkateswaran. 6 April 2019.
- Abeyssekera, Gunindu. Personal Interview of Sukanya Kumar. 11 April 2019.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. vol. 1, University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Azzarelli, Sara. *Dancing Across Gender Boundaries. An Exploration on the Process of Gender Identity Construction Through the Indian Classical Dance Bharatanatyam*. Acta Ethnographica Hungarica, 2015.
- Azzarelli, Sara. *Queering My Mudra: An Exploration on the Role of Bharatanatyam in the Activism of an Indian Queer Group*. Mōtiō: Postgraduate Journal for Dance Practice and Research, 2015.
- Bautze, Joachim K. *The Dancing Girl ('Devadāsī') of South India in Actual Early Photographs*. SAHRDAYA. Studies in Indian and South East Asian Art: Tamil Arts Academy Series 12, 2006.
- Clement, Jennifer, "Reforming Dance Pedagogy: A Feminist Perspective on the art of Performance and Dance Education," 2007. Graduate Theses and Dissertations.
- Das, Shruti. *Ancient Indian Dramaturgy: A Historical Overview of Bharata's Natya Shastra*. Vol. 3, Issue III, Research Scholar - An International Refereed Journal of Literary Explorations, 2015.
- David, Ann. *Religious Dogma or Political Agenda? Bharatanatyam and its Re-emergence in British Tamil Temples*, 2008.

- Falcone, Jessica Marie. *Garba With Attitude: Creative Nostalgia in Competitive Collegiate Gujarati American Folk Dancing*. Project MUSE, *Journal of Asian American Studies*, vol. 16 no. 1, 2013.
- Grainge, P. *Advertising the Archive: Nostalgia and the (Post)national Imaginary*. *American Studies*, 2000.
- Katrak, Ketu H. *Contemporary Indian Dance: New Creative Choreography in India and the Diaspora*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Khokar, Ashish. "E. Krishna Iyer: Bharatanatyam's Guardian Angel." *The Hindu*, 9 Aug 2018.
- O'Shea, Janet. "At Home in the World?: The Bharatanatyam Dancer As Transnational Interpreter." *TDR (1988-)*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2003.
- Reddy, Vanita. *Fashioning Diaspora: Beauty, Femininity, and South Asian American Culture*. American Literatures Initiative, 2016.
- Sai, Veejay. "A Tribute to Kalanidhi Narayanan." *The News Minute*, 1 Mar. 2016.
- Schwartz, Susan L. *Rasa: Performing the Divine in India*. Motilal Banarsidass Pub., 2008.
- Sreenivas, Mytheli. *Wives, Widows, and Concubines: The Conjugal Family Ideal in Colonial India*. Orient Blackswan, 2009.
- Srinivasan, Priya. *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor*. Temple University Press, 2012.