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Archival Her-Stories

St. Denis and the Nachwalis *of Coney Island*

It was in graduate school during a classroom video presentation when I first saw a *hamsasya* mudra formed perfectly on the right hand of a white female dancer known as Ruth St. Denis (one of the three "foremothers" of American modern dance).[1] I was gripped with a thirst to know how and why a white woman in a black-and-white film dating to 1941 could so expertly form a mudra, a hand position that had taken me quite some time to master. I could tell by the tension and placement of her finger on her thumb that she had imbibed the muscle memory of forming this mudra over time. Which Indian dance guru had trained her? As the unruly spectator in her early years of formation, I asked my professor how this was possible. Why was a North American Caucasian woman credited as a "foremother" of American modern dance performing a movement located in Indian dance? I formed this mudra with my own hand as I watched St. Denis doing so on the screen before me. I was even more astonished when I was informed that *Radha*, the dance piece St. Denis was performing, dated back to 1906 and was indeed the signature piece that launched her career as a solo and independent artist. When I read her biography by Suzanne Shelton (1981), I was led to believe that St. Denis happened to see some Indian dancers but that she had not learned to dance from them. Rather, she had conducted research in a library and was further inspired by a cigarette poster of an Egyptian deity. But St. Denis's hand, precisely forming the mudra, and her bodily movements, lifting her skirt in spiral turns, told a different story. As a professional

Indian dancer, I could see and "feel" that St. Denis's training could not have come simply from library research. As the unruly spectator, I felt the kinesthetic traces of Indian dance training that were present in St. Denis's body. While I discovered later that much had happened to St. Denis between her 1906 premiere of *Radha* and the 1941 film of it, photographs and reviews of her 1906 performance led me to search for the bodies of Indian women dancers buried in the archive, who had so clearly inspired and given over their dance practices to St. Denis. This search ultimately became an ethnographic encounter between my body and those of the Indian women dancers documented in the archive. That encounter is staged in this chapter.

While the *nachwalis* discussed in Chapter 2 were deeply buried in the archives, the *nachwalis* discuss in this chapter were even more elusive and could only be excavated through a postcolonial, performative, and "ambivalent" reading of the biography, diary, and autobiography of St. Denis (Bhabha 1994).[2] I also examine the possibility that *nachwalis*' artistic labor was transmitted between bodies and can therefore be excavated through the basic dance principles of movement. These Coney Island dancers were temporary migrant workers visiting the United States for only a few years. Thus far, no photographs give a clear visual record of their presence. But it is this very absence that pushed me to write about them and thus create a dance "bodily archive."[3] Their performances were temporary, but the legacy of their dance remains in the transmission of movement. St. Denis's biographer Suzanne Shelton carefully details various dances performed by St. Denis. In particular, she describes St. Denis's turns and whirls in terms of nautch dance movements in her performance of *Radha*. It is therefore only through an engagement with turns, whirls, and dance movement itself that the labored hauntings of nautch dancers can be understood in terms of their contribution to dance, citizenship, and U.S. labor history.

Contextualizing Nautch at Coney Island

Early Indian dancers continue to find themselves written out of the archives of dance and cultural history despite having influenced several white female performers. White Caucasian female dancers such as Ruth St. Denis battled patriarchy to emerge as independent figures in their own right and claim rights of citizenship. While their work is recorded in multiple historical archives, laboring Indian female bodies that also contributed to American culture have disappeared. In attending to this labor of dance in this chapter, I, as the unruly spectator, am interested in how the terms of citizenship change for both Indian and white dancing women in the United States.

Although the encounter between *nachwalis* and St. Denis is mentioned briefly in dance writings, there are no accounts that lend much credence to this meeting, let alone that nautch dancers may have contributed to St. Denis's emergence as a choreographer. Countless writers confine St. Denis's beginnings to a single moment: an orientalist poster advertising cigarettes depicting "Egyptian deities" (see, e.g., Coorlawala 1992; Desmond 1991; Erdman 1996; Khokar 1961; Shelton 1981; St. Denis 1939). Assuming that St. Denis's creative flair could not have come from corporeal interactions with the nautch dancers she saw in Coney Island in the summer of 1904, and whose forms she imitated artfully in the years to come, dance writers have bought into the idea that St. Denis's dance ideas derived from library research and that her individual genius then emerged through the performance pieces she subsequently created.

St. Denis was concerned with reproducing the spectacle she had seen at Coney Island called the *Durbar of Delhi*. Using her interactions with nautch dancers and Indian male performers, she emerged as an economically independent woman choreographer. At the turn of the century, St. Denis and other white bourgeois women were for the first time taking center stage as choreographers and performers in their own right. Having been previously marginalized, white bourgeois women were resisting patriarchal dominance in a variety of creative ways. As Linda Tomko (2004) rightly points out, white bourgeois women were fighting for suffrage and the right to enter the public sphere in the early twentieth century. When white bourgeois American women are battling against patriarchal control over labor and for political, social, constitutional, and citizenship rights, they simultaneously seize representational and discursive control by using the laboring practices of people of color for "cultural capital" (Williams 1983).[4] Even though modern and postmodern dance historians fail to remember the nautch women whose labor prompted St. Denis's creation of *Radha*—the first elaborate piece she premiered after seeing the exhibitions in the Coney Island "spectacle"—St. Denis's white female body in performance highlights and testifies to their kinesthetic legacy.

As discussed in Chapter 2, nautch women have a history in the United States, and the Coney Island nautch dancers were not an anomaly. An unusually high number of Indian dancers were brought from Bombay to Coney Island by Thompson and Dundy in 1904.[5] Simultaneously, P. T. Barnum brought another group of dancers from South India and Sri Lanka for his New York shows, and another troupe from Sri Lanka were brought to the St. Louis World Exposition. It is the Coney Island troupe that is of concern in this chapter. It seems that the female dancers brought to Coney Island were primarily from northern India, although some were from Sri Lanka. Although

the evidence is ambiguous, it appears that this troupe was dancing a precursor of the "classical" form known today as *Kathak*. In making some of these observations about the dance forms in India during this time period, I am informed by Pallabi Chakravorty's (2000) work on women dancers in Kolkata during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

It is significant that Indian dancers traveled to the United States between 1880 and 1904, because dance in India was undergoing a massive transformation at the time. The Indian anti-nautch movement began in 1892 as Indian nationalists opposing the colonial government linked dancing girls to prostitution and urged a "boycott of nautch dancing at formal occasions" (Meduri 1996, 56). This culminated in the Abolition Act of 1947, although the colonial government had already issued an inquiry about the *devadasi* practice by 1872. Effectively, dancing women bore the brunt of nationalist negotiations with colonialist ideals, through which, ironically, the agendas of empire and nationhood became identical.[6] Although the dancing women were not valued, their dances were. Their dance was subsequently modernized, classicized, and reconstructed on the bodies of upper-caste and middle-class Indian women by the mid-twentieth century. Certainly, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nautch women were not the most likely ambassadors of Indian culture to the West. It is not surprising, then, that nautch women who came to the United States during this time have been written out of both U.S. and Indian dance histories.

My argument in this chapter is threefold. First, I suggest that although dance scholars have begun to acknowledge the bodies of people of color who have contributed to American modern dance,[7] far more work needs to be done to examine the influence of intercultural connections. I contend that a reexamination of the inception of modern dance from Oriental dance reveals the labor of Indian dancing women and men, which has been rendered invisible. This calls the "national" and modernist project of American dance into question.[8] By attending to Indian female dancers as laborers, we can understand their contribution to American nationalist cultural practices in meaningful ways.

Second, I suggest that a focus on gendered bodily discourses and practices opens another archive in interrogating orientalism. Following the work of Edward Said (1979), discussions of orientalism that examine knowledge and power have largely focused on literature.[9] It is here, then, that I ask what happens to the theory of orientalism when corporealities are made central to the investigation of colonialism (in this case, U.S. imperialism), knowledge, and power. I argue that contradictions and racist overtones come to light that were previously sidelined in North American orientalist discourse. The violence of North American orientalism and its racist underpinnings have left

marks on bodies both through enactments of exclusionary immigration policies and through representational and discursive control. A close analysis of St. Denis's early performances reveals a deep imbrication within the violence of orientalist discourse. Rather than focus on only the spiritual, I ask what an examination of the material can do for our understandings of St. Denis's performance. Therefore, I am calling for an interrogation of dance and Indian dancing bodies as they intersect with immigration law. In Chapter 2, I argued that at the moment of contact between Indian dancers and New York audiences in 1880, the racial formation of Indians was taking place, and anti-Asian sentiment was already under way. Here we see the development and material repercussions of the anti-Asian bias on the terms of citizenship for both Indians and white Caucasian bourgeois women.

Third, I argue for an examination of kinesthetic contact among dancing women, as well as the discourses of living, breathing texts produced by these dancing bodies, rather than a narrow focus on the written record, which I term the *bodily archive*.[10] The significance of bodily contact and the subsequent kinesthetic exchange between St. Denis and the nautch dancers must be highlighted.[11] I suggest an examination of discourses by and through the body by focusing on its corporealities, where bodily reality is not seen as a "natural or absolute given but as a tangible and substantial category of cultural experience" (Foster 1995, xi). Such a focus on the performing body as its own archive reveals alternate understandings of dance practices in North America. Turning to the bodily archive also enables a look at how the terms of U.S. citizenship were contested, lost by particular gendered and racial subjects, and won by others. Examining this period between 1904 and 1924 allows us to track the shifting terms of citizenship as they played out and were challenged by Indian women dancers and white women dancers.

I am informed by subaltern and postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak, who argues that feminist historiography's key method is excavation but that this process is always caught in a double bind. Spivak posits that the subaltern woman whose story has not been told in the official archive is always outside representation, and therefore, bringing her into representation evacuates her subaltern status (1988, 1999).[12] In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Spivak suggests that although the subaltern might speak, she is not really heard. I acknowledge the impossibility of recovering or representing nautch women as subjects in their own right. Rather, I take up the call of subaltern postcolonial scholars such as Spivak, Gyan Prakash, and Dipesh Chakrabarty to find the partial, fragmented, and hybrid subject within the "colonial"—or "imperialist"—U.S. archive. For example, Spivak argues that the subaltern subject emerges only when she is needed in the space of imperial production. As the historical record is created, who is dropped, and when

and why, is directly related to the imperatives of imperialism (Spivak 1988). Critical historical dance analysis is difficult at best because of the ephemerality of performance, but a focus on corporeality and kinesthetic exchange offers an opening for bodies that have been unaccounted for.[13]

I begin to tell nautch women's stories while acknowledging that these stories can only be partial, filled with half truths, and at times, fictive.[14] In the process I am not creating another originary moment, or faulting St. Denis for a partial history; rather, I offer an alternative to the singular dominant history of the dance encounter between St. Denis and Indian nautch women and men. I also acknowledge that it is through my own training as an Indian dancer that I interrogate the archive from a kinesthetic perspective. It is only after my own bodily reaction as a dancer when I saw Ruth St. Denis's hand forming a mudra in a black-and-white film that I began this journey.

Beginning with a critical analysis of dance scholars who have failed to account for the encounter between St. Denis and the *nachwalis*, I move toward an interrogation of this dance meeting between St. Denis and the nautch women, offering insights based on newspaper reports from New York and historical records from India and discussing the absent-present as it is enabled through a kinesthetic perspective.[15]

I suggest that an attention to bodily practices in terms of the bodily archive reveals the kinesthetic legacy that Indian dancers left on white bourgeois women, such as St. Denis, that enabled her to stage her entrance into the public arena and emerge as a "citizen" of the United States. This chapter, in effect, challenges current dance history accounts that do not allow room for the possibility that the kinesthetic interaction of multiple laboring bodies creates new dance forms, as opposed to an individual genius choreographer, who magically creates movement through library research or a spiritual reaction to an image on a poster. Accounting for this bodily labor ruptures simplistic, essentialist origin myths that aspire to pure beginnings and, instead, unearths the potential to rethink dance, women, and labor history in America as a complex, rich amalgam of forms and processes.

Ultimately, I suggest that the dance practices of Indian performers enabled Ruth St. Denis to enter the public sphere and stage the terms of cultural citizenship for white middle- and upper-class women. The singular citizen body was enabled by the labor of many bodies. Indian women performed as contract laborers and were forced to leave the United States because of racist immigration policies that targeted Asians. However, I suggest that their bodily practices left behind kinesthetic traces of dance culture. These traces enabled white women like St. Denis to obtain cultural capital and emerge as economically independent solo artists; it also enabled them to

negotiate full political citizenship rights during the battle for female suffrage in the United States.

The Origin of American Modern Dance: A Cigarette Poster?

> The music becomes threatening, building to a furioso, as Radha rises and twitches her hips. Her skirt whips angrily from side to side. One elbow leads her into a spiral turn. Reversing directions, she turns restlessly until a *nautch* whirl possesses her. As she spins one hand makes its own agitated rotation . . . she writhes and trembles to a climax, then lies supine as darkness descends. (Shelton 1981, 61; emphasis added)

Dance scholars such as Uttara Coorlawala (1992), Jane Desmond (1991), Joan Erdman (1996), Deborah Jowitt (1989), Mohan Khokar (1961), and Suzanne Shelton (1981), to name a few, note that St. Denis saw nautch dancers at Coney Island in the summer of 1904. They dismiss this encounter as insignificant and focus instead on a cigarette poster as the proto-text that inspired St. Denis. I refer here to the cigarette poster featuring an Egyptian deity that has, metaphorically speaking, blown smoke over the nautch women themselves since it is the single, most cited explanation for St. Denis's emergence as a choreographer. Perhaps these writers were influenced by St. Denis's autobiography, in which the author attributes her initial creative stage to her reaction to the poster:

> I saw a modernized and most un-Egyptian figure of the goddess Isis. She was sitting on a throne, framed by a sort of pylon. At her feet were the waters of the Nile with lotus growing. . . . Lying on my bed, looking at this strange instrument of fate, I identified myself in a flash with the figure of Isis. . . . I knew that my destiny as a dancer had sprung alive in that moment. (1939, 52)

This passage suggests that individual genius sprang from an intense reaction to an advertisement, an orientalist poster purporting to depict an Egyptian god. Although the poster image is pure fantasy, St. Denis identifies with a god she considers to be Isis. While the poster may have inspired St. Denis, I contend that it was her bodily encounter with Coney Island nautch dancers that enabled her to create her first piece. Indeed, St. Denis returned to her original *Egypta*, inspired by the poster, only in 1910, after she had already completed *Radha*, *Snake Charmer*, and *Incense* in 1906.

The other wellspring for St. Denis's genius most often mentioned in dance literature is her library research—even though St. Denis admits the Coney Island spectacle captivated her, particularly the snake charmers and nautch dancers. In her autobiography, she admits, "When I reached home that evening I had determined to create one or two Nautch dances, in imitation of these whirling skirted damsels. . . . [W]ith these I was sure I would find some vaudeville bookings" (1939, 56). Suzanne Shelton, St. Denis's biographer, views the nautch dancers as non sequiturs who merely prompted St. Denis's research in the Astor Library.

> She had in mind something like the Indian dances she had seen the previous summer at Coney Island, where the world-famous durbar, or gathering of Indian potentates, was reproduced as an *East Indian sideshow, complete with rajahs, snake-charmers, and nautch girls*. Looking for information on India, Ruthie went to the Astor Library where, in true Belasco fashion, she *researched her ideas*. (1981, 50; emphasis added)

As this passage demonstrates, Shelton suggests that St. Denis researched her ideas from textual sources and emerged a genius in the performance piece she subsequently created. Nautch women's bodily encounter with St. Denis is marginalized in this account. Interestingly, dance critic Deborah Jowitt (1989) remarks that St. Denis admitted to a reporter in 1905 that she had been influenced by the Coney Island dancers (131). However, Jowitt seems to suggest that St. Denis did not believe this to be an encounter that was authentic enough to deeply influence her work. Dance scholars who focus on Indian dance, such as Mohan Khokar, Uttara Coorlawala, and Joan Erdman, support the view that the nautch women were insignificant in the development of U.S. dance. Instead, these scholars look to the influence that Western dance has had on the revival of Indian dance, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s. Since Indian nationalist history has sought to erase Western connections in Indian dance, Khokar's, Coorlawala's, and Erdman's contributions are significant in redressing this imbalance. However, in the process, Erdman ends up arguing for an originary moment for Indian dance in Western dance, which blocks the possibility of an exchange between India and the West before the 1920s. The privileging of the "classical" also informs Erdman's argument for the inception of Indian dance in Europe:[16]

> While it is true that twentieth-century Indian dance is a historical consequence of the idea of oriental dance, which did in fact originate in Europe, the dialogue between oriental dance (European) and

> classical dance (Indian) was a complex interchange of expectations and discovery. Actual Indian dance influenced programs of western artistes only after their interest in the feminine divine principle and in the play of the gods provoked Ruth St. Denis and prima ballerina Anna Pavlova to seek authentic Indian dance and dancers in India in the 1920s. (1996, 290)

Erdman's account dismisses nautch women (perhaps because their dance would not be considered classical) and does not problematize Euro-American Oriental female dancers' practices. While Jane Desmond (1991) offers an insightful feminist psychoanalytic critique of colonialism, orientalism, and sexuality in St. Denis's work, she does not consider evidence of St. Denis's visit to the Coney Island show. Thus, Desmond, along with other dance scholars, has failed to examine the brown female bodies behind the smoke of the cigarette poster.[17] In rethinking dance scholarship regarding this encounter, I use a postcolonial lens to read the biography and autobiography of St. Denis with an ambivalence that, by privileging the corporeal dance encounter, allows for multiple possibilities.[18]

The Dance Encounter

> During these days someone took me down to Coney Island. I was mildly intrigued by the sights and sounds, but my whole attention was not captured until I came to an East Indian village which had been brought over in its entirety by the owners of the Hippodrome. Here, for the first time, I saw snake charmers and holy men and Nautch dancers, and something of the remarkable fascination of India caught hold of me. (St. Denis 1939, 55)

Ruth St. Denis was one of the millions visiting New Coney in the summer of 1904. The nautch dancers did not take much notice of this one white woman among the throngs passing by and therefore never quite understood the impact they had made. They, too, eventually returned to India, never knowing they had helped to ignite American modern dance. Or perhaps they did. Did they know who St. Denis was? Might they have realized the impression they made on the millions of visitors who saw them at Coney Island (*New York Times*, May 15, 1904, 3)? Indeed, it is frustrating not to know their perspective. Because, after all, what remains is but a one-sided account of the encounter in St. Denis's diaries, autobiography, and biographies. Unlike the dances of the *nachwalis* who performed under Augustin Daly in New York, the performances of the Coney Island dancers were not

viewed as legitimate art deserving newspaper reviews. What is possible, then, is a postcolonial reading of these fragments to account for the ephemeral bodies that graced these archives. But, more importantly, I pursue the idea that these bodies are moving in the archive; in effect, they are unlocatable, unfixable, and transitory. Just as dancing is ephemeral, and just as temporary Asian laborers are in transit while visiting the United States, so too is their danced labor transitory. It is from the perspective of dance that an account from the "other" side might be possible, not just through a postcolonial reading of absence but through a presence found in the principles of dance and bodily transmission. As the following passage from St. Denis's autobiography attests, she was significantly influenced by the dance movements she saw at Coney Island:

> When I reached home that evening I had determined to create one or two Nautch dances, in imitation of these *whirling skirted damsels*, and possibly a Japanese number, a faint echo of Mme. Sadi Yaco [*sic*]. With these I was sure I would find some vaudeville bookings and, with the money earned, produce *Egypta*. I was very happy over my decision, and went the next day to the Astor Library to do a little research in Nautch costumes. (St. Denis 1939, 55; emphasis added)

Although St. Denis's diary and autobiography record her encounter with Indian dancing girls in the summer of 1904, the accounts are brief. St. Denis describes the quality of the dancing and the costumes that she saw and, more significantly, admits that she was influenced by the event. It is important to note St. Denis's own admission that she experienced nautch dance practice and all its physicality firsthand and that this fueled a fascination, leading to her research of nautch costumes in the library. If we attend to what St. Denis actually says, we begin to understand the materialist dimensions of her desire. She encounters live dancing bodies, whom she blatantly desires to imitate for several reasons. She astutely recognizes that, fascination for India aside, she stands to make substantial economic gain by imitating these live dance forms for vaudeville audiences. Understanding the market for orientalia, she imagines herself becoming successful by performing her own orientalist desire for others and thus garnering cultural capital. In obtaining this cultural capital, St. Denis achieved stardom as a female status symbol, which was no small feat for a woman. St. Denis believed she was witnessing an authentic "East Indian village" of Indians who were not performing but in fact "living" as they would in their homeland.[19] Perhaps we can think of St. Denis as a dance anthropologist who was restaging "the natives" for widespread American consumption.

In her accounts of the creation of her dances, particularly *Incense* (1906), St. Denis admits she did not know how everything came together:

> My first Indian dance was a jumble of everything I was aware of in Indian art, but with little sense of balance and continuity. Ideas came in a stream and from quite unrelated sources . . . *I thought in terms of scenes and not of technical virtuosity.* Mother and I moved our bits of toast about to indicate where the Indian water carrier came in and spoke to the fruit seller, where the merchant's stall was, and where the brass seller squatted to watch the snake charmer's exhibition. (1939, 56; emphasis added)

St. Denis acknowledges her ideas came from unrelated sources. Of particular note is her admission of interest in "scenes." These scenes reflect many elements of the Coney Island show she had viewed, yet she gives the source no credit. Newspaper reports of the time gush and revel in the exotic spectacle created at Coney Island and reflect the "scenes" that St. Denis describes:

> There was the Vice Royal palace in the city that had been reproduced in miniature, and a pageant of Oriental splendor was presented. There were guilded chariots and prancing horses, and trained elephants and *dancing girls,* regiments of soldiers, and an astonishing number of *real Eastern people* and animals in gay and stately trappings. . . . In fact there was a charm about the streets of Delhi that kept the people spellbound until the exhibition ended. Five thousand people at a time saw this remarkable show, and then went back to see it a second time. (*New York Times*, May 8, 1904, 5; emphasis added)

There are only brief mentions of the nautch dancers. The spectacle as a whole, with animals and large numbers of costumed people, captured this journalist's interest. But for St. Denis, it was the nautch women who mattered most, even though she conveniently forgets their centrality and focuses instead on the broader show.

An interview with Frederic Thompson (an impresario of Luna Park) reveals that elephants and Indian performers had left Calcutta in April 1904 on ships that were expected to arrive in New York before the summer opening of Coney Island on May 7 (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 10, 1904, 5). It is remarkable that Thompson was able to secure a contract with these dancers to bring them to New York, particularly when "traditional" dance and dancers were under attack in India. Newspaper reports and firsthand

accounts of *Durbar of Delhi* offer slightly different information about the whole spectacle. While some reports refer to the dancers as part of a procession, others suggest they were part of a separate show. Photographs of the procession offering partial views also suggest the order in which nautch performers might have been viewed. Apart from one or two brief accounts, we do not know what the dancing looked like or what was being performed. Using this piecemeal material, I offer a view of how the dancers might have been seen in relation to the larger event. In the next section I offer a deconstructive method that takes into account my own complicity in the project of an impossible recovery. I lay bare the notion that my representation of nautch women is an intersubjective, ethnographic encounter between my body and the archive.

The Staging of Nautch at Coney Island

The audience stands before a grandstand that faces a staged city street. The street is lined with bazaars selling spices and trinkets as would be seen in the streets of Delhi, and to one side is a mosque resembling the Taj Mahal (*New York American and Journal*, June 17, 1904, 16–17). The parade begins in the distance before a backdrop of the Himalayas. Six female nautch dancers lead the parade, "brilliant in reds and yellows, with sloe eyes and graceful bodies," and bend from side to side, swaying and moving slowly to the music (*New York American and Journal*, June 17, 1904). Following is a procession of elephants with their Indian male mahouts. The elephants are decorated with silk and velvet saddle-cloths (*New York Daily News*, March 20, 1904, 10). *Howdahs* from India are mounted on top and covered with more than two thousand brilliant lights, which sparkle and dazzle at night, but it is daytime now. Winding their way down the main street of Luna Park, steered by their mahouts and the "rajahs" seated on them, the elephants are followed by chariots, soldiers on horses, soldiers on foot, and then camels. Musicians, acrobats, jugglers, snake charmers, "artisans," and "yogis" bring up the rear of the procession, dressed in reds and yellows that match the color of the roofs and buildings of Luna Park (*New York Times*, May 8, 1904; *New York Times*, May 15, 1904; *New York American and Journal*, June 19, 1904; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 10, 1904). In performing for the *Durbar of Delhi*, the dancers would have created quite a scene (*New York Times*, May 8, 1904, 2; Shelton 1981, 50; St. Denis 1939, 55).

As the parade fills up the "streets of Delhi," the audience is treated to a short five-minute performance by dancers, musicians, jugglers, and snake charmers. In the background are "merchants" selling their wares in the bazaars. The dancers then stand in two rows and perform before the bazaars

on one side. They trace rhythmic patterns with their feet, following the sound of the drummer who accompanies them. They start spinning, and their skirts fly out in the wind. They are indeed eye catching and together with the snake charmers seem to be the center of attention. All eyes are riveted on them (except for perhaps those of the children, who are distracted by the elephants trumpeting in line behind the performers). As the dancers finish their piece, they move into the background and mingle with the folks in the bazaar. The parade ends with elephants sliding down the chutes into the water below, thrilling the crowd (*New York American and Journal*, May 15, 1904).

It is possible that the dances the nautch women performed were simple versions of *tatkar* (rhythmic footwork) or *tukde* (combinations of rhythmic footwork, hand movements, and turns), which are aspects of folk dance and the *Kathak* repertoire.[20] One dance in particular involved rhythm and series of fast turns and spins, which is perhaps what caught St. Denis's attention and is mentioned in her diary and biography as the dance of "the whirling skirted damsels." The dancers were most likely wearing skirts that would fly out when they spun on their heels. Their hands formed mudras—gestures used only for aesthetic purposes. It is also unlikely that the dancers performed the more complex, expressional aspects of their repertoire, such as *thumris*, which are facial and bodily expressions that interpret sung text.[21] But it is possible that the dancers used facial expression and some elements of mime in their performance, and perhaps even interpreted a *bhajan* (a primarily mimetic devotional piece). This could explain St. Denis's conflation of Indian dances with spirituality, an interpretation that became a hallmark of her work.

Dance Labor and Bodily Transmissions

St. Denis's creation of the dance pieces *Incense* (1906), *Radha* (1906), and *Nautch* (1908) reflected many elements of the *nachwalis'* dances. While St. Denis may not have formally trained with these dancers, as a receptive audience member, she did have kinesthetic contact that influenced her creations. St. Denis was particularly articulate with her hands and fingers. Her performance was composed of posing, followed by turns, and a shuffling walk. Several aspects of what St. Denis saw among the Coney Island nautch dancers, such as the *tukde* along with the use of mudras and facial expression, repeatedly emerged in many of her choreographies, including *Snake Charmer* (1906), *Incense*, and *Dance of the Black/Gold Sari* (1913). As Shelton writes,

> Ruth had seen nautch girls at Coney Island, and she added her own hijinks to their basic dance. . . . Through the years St. Denis's Nautch

> evolved into half-dozen different dances . . . but always the basic ingredients were Ruth's character acting, her head-isolations, enticing arms, skirt manipulations, whirling, drumming feet, and the tinkle of ankle bells. (1981, 81)

She could not have easily learned these elements solely from her research of orientalist texts. I am not arguing, however, that kinesthetic contact with the nautch women is the only means through which St. Denis created her dances. Clearly, her training in Delsarte[22] technique, her training in Genevieve Stebbins's work (also derived from Delsarte), her focus on yoga practice, and her viewing of the Japanese artist Sadayakko Kawakami all contributed to her creations, and all of these influences call attention to corporeal interactions as the basis of St. Denis's work.

The *nachwalis* most likely returned to India, and we do not know what became of them.[23] The anti-nautch campaign was in full swing in India as a result of colonialist and nationalist pressures, and soon most dancing women were forced to leave their art form behind and turn to other professions. They simultaneously disappear from the North American and Indian dance archives just as St. Denis's career takes off. In the orientalist tradition, St. Denis's performances were considered the creative imaginings of a white bourgeois American woman. For countless American audiences of the time and for subsequent dance writers, it was easier to imagine and desire Indian dance as a foreign element coming from afar than as a firsthand bodily encounter among women. Despite the presence of nautch bodies at Coney Island, U.S. orientalism served to hide this face-to-face encounter behind the imagined one that enabled St. Denis's career to thrive.

In her early performances, the press and audiences alike mistook St. Denis for a Hindu princess, a Hindu dancer, and even a Native American performer (Shelton 1981, 53). For example, when an eccentric and powerful New York hostess invited St. Denis "and her Hindus to dance in her mansion" in 1906, the press believed they were Native Americans (Shelton 1981, 53). St. Denis used such orientalist misidentifications to aid her career, both for economic profit and cultural capital, and performed the role of the "Hindu dancer" extremely well. It is clear from her autobiography that St. Denis was very aware of her participation in the racialized economy of the time. She contributed to and marketed herself in this economy through her performance in brownface at the start of her concert performances, in which she covered her face, arms, and legs with brown paint. Far from contested, the brownface show was embraced by the New York public (St. Denis 1939, 71).[24]

In the orientalist tradition, St. Denis seized control of the representation of the Indian "others" and reconfigured their ancient dances through her

own framework. She participated in the rhetoric of mistaken ethnicity and played on these performance mis-tropes for her own ends. St. Denis, in her performances, conflated her own body with that of a brown Indian woman, collapsing the character she performed onstage with herself. Interestingly, it was her mother who reminded St. Denis that she was an American dancer, not an Indian one.

> Up until now we've called you Radha. But as you're going to do other things, I think you ought to use your own name. After all, *you are an American dancer, and not an East Indian*. What was it that Belasco used to call you? Wasn't it Saint Denis?" (St. Denis 1939, 68; emphasis added)

Mother Denis rightly suggested to St. Denis that she had the ability to stage various kinds of Orientals and should not risk being associated with one type over another. This set the stage for St. Denis's other Asian pieces. Throughout her career, St. Denis staged dance practices from Japan, China, Thailand, and Indonesia, to name a few. Like other orientalists who collect Asian objects (Yoshihara 2002), St. Denis became a curator of Asian artistic practices, but unlike other collectors, she housed, displayed, and rechoreographed her collection in, on, and through her body.

For Indian dancing women, orientalist state policy in the form of racist immigration laws did not allow for contestations of dance representation, at least not until the 1940s, with the arrival of traditional female Indian performers such as Varalakshmi and Bhanumati,[25] or, one could argue, even more significantly, not until the 1960s, with the performances of Balasaraswati.[26] But by the 1930s, Oriental dance had metamorphosed into modern dance, and St. Denis's students, including Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman, were performing under its new name. Oriental dance produced another offshoot, ethnic dance, which encompasses dances of the world. Ethnic dance was also propagated by white American dancers such as La Meri. Thus, the kinesthetic legacy of *nachwalis* was absorbed and rendered invisible in North American modern dance.

The multiple valences through which the discourse of orientalism operated perhaps enabled St. Denis to perform as an "authentic" Indian dancing girl because it was easier to imagine the "native" through the white American woman's body than through the "authentic" nautch herself.[27] St. Denis familiarized the unknown by domesticating the foreign, even polluted, body[28] of the Oriental "other" and thereby made her performance safer for American audiences. This removed the need for brown Indian women's bodies to represent "India" aesthetically or literally and left the field open for white female

performers to stage "India" for American audiences. St. Denis, however, did not do this alone. She was aided by Indian male performers, whose contributions to her career have also remained unacknowledged. Capitalizing on the desire for Asian goods and philosophies by using her body as a locus for Oriental desire, and aided by several Indian men to authenticate her work, St. Denis enabled white North American audiences to experience the Indian "other" in a safe way. I explore this idea in more detail in Chapter 4.

Nachwalis' labor was effectively effaced through St. Denis's kinesthetic absorption of their dance practices. While Indian women dancers disappeared, their dance forms did not. Their dances helped St. Denis stage herself as a solo, independent female choreographer. Viewing Indian women dancers as laborers helps us understand that while Indians were made into noncitizens, nonimmigrants, and nonlaborers in the United States, their dancing bodies left archival kinesthetic traces that were absorbed by white women dancers. This transfer of cultural practices enabled an accumulation of cultural capital for white women dancers who were then able to assert the terms of their cultural and political citizenship.

Conclusion

> Cawnpore [*sic*], March 10. We are seated in a cool, rather dark room in our bungalow, waiting. Presently, along the corridor, comes the conjurer we have summoned. . . . To our amazement, he says he was in the old Thompson and Dundy performances at Coney Island! He must, then, have been in that troup [*sic*] of jugglers and snake charmers who started me off on this wild career of Indian dancing. (St. Denis 1939, 289)

As this passage suggests, years later when St. Denis visited India, she admitted the contribution of Indian bodies to her dancing. While she does not name particular women dancers, she suggests that the troupe ignited her career in Indian dancing. In this chapter, I have focused on the gaps in St. Denis's biography and autobiography. I have attempted to locate *nachwalis'* moving, dancing bodies in between the accounts of St. Denis's dances and her life. It is their subaltern bodies moving within the spectrum of visibility and invisibility that is key in this discussion. St. Denis's performances, photographs, films, and writing attest to the absent presence of Indian dancers. But these archives need to be mined using dance methodologies and choreographic analyses before these dancers can be made visible and seen moving in these in-between spaces.