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## When Is Contemporary Dance?

SanSan Kwan

**A**t a meeting in 2015, the dance faculty in my department at UC Berkeley proposed changing the title of some of our technique classes from “modern dance” to “contemporary dance.” Historically, the program has been known for teaching Graham technique,<sup>1</sup> but in the past ten to fifteen years the classes in our department have evolved and, as is increasingly true in many dance studios and dance programs across the United States, “modern dance” may no longer be an appropriate title for the technique we teach.<sup>2</sup> At a recent faculty meeting it had been unanimously agreed that we would pursue the name change. A few days later my colleague, Lisa Wymore, announced the upcoming change to a group of leaders from the various student-run hip hop groups on campus. There was strident resistance. They said that “contemporary dance” was not an accurate term for what we teach. This response befuddled me initially, but then I recalled that there are several contexts for understanding “contemporary dance” and that the term is not fully translatable across those contexts or even within them. In the concert dance world (including our dance program), contemporary dance assumes one set of (sometimes) shared aesthetic values; in the commercial/competitive dance world (which the students were referencing), contemporary dance looks rather different. In a “world dance”<sup>3</sup> context “contemporary,” as an adjective appended to a regional form (i.e., contemporary African dance, contemporary Asian dance, contemporary Latin American dance), reminds us of the complex legacies and negotiations, distinctions and exclusions that postcolonialism and globalization have wrought on taxonomies of dance.



Despite, or perhaps because of, these contextual differences, there remains anxiety over the need to identify specific aesthetic markers under the category “contemporary.” For example, the following two dance critics bemoan the indecipherability of contemporary dance. In a 2005 article in the *New Yorker*, dance critic Joan Acocella writes, “Right now, New York’s ‘downtown’ dance shows no engulfing trends, as it did in the nineteen-sixties and seventies (conceptualism and politics), or in the eighties and nineties (irony and politics)” (94). In a 2011 dance review in the *New York Times*, Claudia La Rocco writes, “For large stretches of ‘To the Ones I Love’ it is difficult to get any sense of a mind at work. The movement palette is boilerplate contemporary-international—ballet, modern, capoeira, yoga, hip-hop—with all of the various complexities and particularities

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smoothed out to create one vague patina” (La Rocco 2011). Perhaps in order to enable a theorization of current work we want to imagine that it is part of some unifying trend, some consistent logic, or some aesthetic, political, cultural, or intellectual imperative that drives it. We aim to identify recognizable traits as a way to name something about the era in which we live. This aim reminds me that the term “contemporary” also connotes a temporal designation—it is the dance that is “together with time.” Thus, we seek to align the “contemporary” with a series of aesthetic preoccupations while also reckoning with it as the dance that is happening now.<sup>4</sup> The problem with the doubled value of the term is that it yokes that which is contemporaneous to a stylistic definition of what is contemporary. This in turn risks excluding an artist whose work does not align with what we have determined to be contemporary. Thus, she might not be regarded as coeval (Fabian 1983) with her “contemporaries.” Of course, there is a racial and ethnic dimension to this problem, to this conflation of the temporal and the aesthetic. Contemporary dance is dominated by Euro-American artists. Are artists who do not fit the prescribed style then not “contemporary”? 

This double bind is analogous to the much-discussed relationship between modernity, modernism, and modern dance. Danielle Robinson (2015) studies an early conception of “modern dance,” which referred not to the concert dance of the mid-twentieth century in the United States, but to popular (African-American derived) social dance forms of the early twentieth century. She ties these forms directly to industrialization and to modernity’s fraught relationship to black/white racial formation. Robinson’s study both explores the intertwining of temporality, cultural politics, and aesthetics and reminds us that, historically, “modern dance” was, like contemporary dance now, multireferential. In academe, both modern dance and contemporary dance, as categories, quickly are assumed to reference to concert dance.

Meanwhile, Sally Banes (1980) references the more common understanding of modern dance as the concert dance form of the mid-twentieth century in order to argue that postmodern dance actually reveals more of the hallmarks of artistic modernism than modern dance does. Susan Manning (1988) counters Banes, arguing that her formulation is overly schematic. My point here is that aesthetic definitions and categories of dance and their relationship to time periods, not to mention cultural politics, have been historically vexed. 

In the introduction to a collection called *Dance* in a series entitled “Documents of Contemporary Art,” André Lepecki, rather than defining a set of features of contemporary dance, argues that the ontological nature of dance itself—its “ephemerality, corporeality, precariousness, scoring, and performativity” (2012, 15)—lends it an intrinsic contemporaneity. It is, by definition, always of the moment, always cutting edge. This formulation adds another layer to the “timeliness” of contemporary dance. In addition to the temporal situatedness denoted in the idea of the contemporary, that is, the fact that contemporary dance is the dance that is happening in this time period, Lepecki adds the ontological definition of dance as a time-based art, of dance as inherently in time, thus inherently contemporary. He further explains that this constitutive quality of dance, when placed into a visual arts framework, provides the potential for political and aesthetic radicalism. That is, when situated alongside the typically static visual arts or when framed, for example, in the institutional structures of a museum, dance “as a practice of contemporaneity” is radical.<sup>5</sup> His formulation feels viable when he elaborates it within the context of Western concert dance as it is integrated into the traditionally object-oriented visual arts, but I am not certain it works in all contexts. He argues that dance “as a practice of contemporaneity” (2012, 15) opens up political possibilities in other arts.

What are the politics of dance as contemporaneity within the realm of dance itself? As I mentioned above, the term “contemporary dance” is fraught and contended across various dance genres. It does not mean the same thing in all dance communities. In this article I explore the various understandings of contemporary dance within concert, commercial, and world dance contexts. I would venture that even if dance, by ontological definition, is a practice of contemporaneity, notions of

what looks contemporary vary across these contexts. I would also venture that even if dance affords political potential when placed in the environment of the museum, the political stakes and motivations within dance itself as it is understood across these three internal contexts is also very different. Despite their dissimilarities, however, these three dance worlds collide with and confront each other; they define themselves sometimes with and sometimes against one another; dancers, choreographers, and audiences shuttle across them, and their valuations in the marketplace, as well as their cultural capital, slip and slide along with the “contemporary” moniker that attaches to them. As my opening anecdote reveals, in the academy we tend to privilege Western concert dance, forgetting that other dance genres are also contemporary. In this article I work to bring attention to other forms of contemporary dance. I argue that placing these other uses of the term “contemporary” alongside one another can provide some insight into the ways “high art” dance, popular dance, and non-Western dance are increasingly wrapped up with each other and into the ways their separations reveal our artistic, cultural, and political prejudices and how the forces of the market make themselves felt. Even if dance is inherently contemporary, inherently “together with time,” I want to explore more specifically what contemporariness means within various categories of dance practice.

In what follows I will outline some of the basic stylistic traits, artistic motivations, aesthetic values, sociocultural contexts, and training practices of contemporary concert dance, contemporary commercial dance, and contemporary world dance (primarily focusing my attention on contemporary Asian dance). Of course, none of these categories is strictly bounded, and many traits I name could be shared across categories. Likewise, not all artists or works within a certain category exhibit all the traits I name.

## Contemporary Concert Dance

In the concert dance arena “contemporary dance” is sometimes used interchangeably with the terms “modern,” “postmodern,” “experimental,” “conceptual,” or, in New York City, “downtown” (Berman 2008, 1). Sometimes it is defined against “modern” and “postmodern”—as both periods and forms. Sometimes it is called “post-postmodern,” or even “contemporary modern.”

Formally speaking, contemporary dance might include release technique and/or contact improvisation (sometimes considered the techniques of postmodern dance), floor work, various modern dance techniques (i.e., Graham, Limon, Horton, Hawkins, or Cunningham), and/or ballet. Increasingly, contemporary dance draws on non-Western forms (i.e., African and African diasporic dance, Asian martial arts, yoga) and street dance forms.<sup>6</sup> Contemporary dance often requires a dancing body that is highly versatile across a variety of skills—what Susan Foster describes as the “hired body” (1997).<sup>7</sup>

On the stage, contemporary dance might also incorporate spoken text, multimedia, even virtual reality. Bill T. Jones, Miguel Gutierrez, and Joe Goode, among many others, frequently employ talking in their work.<sup>8</sup> As for media, my colleague Lisa Wymore and her partner Sheldon Smith have created work that involves colocated performers in the Bay Area and southern California dancing together virtually via screens and cameras. They have performed structured improvisations based on directives determined by an algorithm and narrated via a computer voice.

Some contemporary dance can be conceptual and antispectacle. New York City choreographer Sam Kim is inspired by the painter Cy Twombly who, in describing a line, says, “It does not illustrate. It is the sensation of its own realization” (Kourlas 2016). Kim’s work, *Sister to a Fiend* (2015a), experiments with ritual, repetition, and exhaustion. Three women stomp the floor, slap their bodies, shake, grope, and whip around, moving with raw force as though driven by some kind of internal power; Kim calls the work an “incantation” (2015b). Ralph Lemon’s *How Can You Stay in the*

*House All Day and Not Go Anywhere* (2010) is a multimedia work combining narration, home video, clips from Lemon's earlier work, clips from an old science fiction film, and highly physical but not "technical" dancing. It features a moment during which nothing occurs onstage while a dancer sobs continuously, first off stage, and then with her back to the audience onstage, for eight long minutes.

At the same time, contemporary concert dance can sometimes be opposed to the dramatic or the excessively expressive; it can be highly formal or sometimes deliberately pedestrian. New York City-based choreographer Moriah Evans' *Social Dance 1–8: Index* (2015) involves a choreography of precise, minimalist patterns repeated many times. At moments, the vocabulary mimics club dance moves (hip rolls, shimmies), but the dancers deliberately perform without any visible emotion. In Juliette Mapp's *Luxury Rentals* (2016), dancers alternately narrate personal stories, slump at a table for long periods, read aloud from *Anna Karenina*, lie down on the floor, and occasionally dance prosaic, intimate duets and trios facing one another.

Contemporary concert dance often values process over product. In *(Un)Made* (2015) Portland-based choreographer Linda Austin initiated a multiyear-long game of choreographic "telephone" in which she performed a solo and then asked other dancers to re-perform their version of her solo for other dancers who then re-performed their iterations, and so on.

Contemporary concert dance often experiments with nontraditional spaces and nontraditional spectator-performer relationships. Museums, for example, have become a frequent site for dance performances.<sup>9</sup> Often, it is collaboratively choreographed. Many choreographers draw on a process in which they ask dancers to improvise based on an idea and then the choreographer sets phrases culled from those improvisations. Contemporary concert dance can be critically self-reflective. For example, Miguel Gutierrez's *Age & Beauty* explores his personal experience as a middle-aged, gay male choreographer, his relationship to artistic burnout, and the tension between making art and the necessities of managing of his artistic career (2015). Jérôme Bél frequently creates work that resists the idea of choreography or dance at all. Contemporary concert dance seems to develop or, some would argue,<sup>10</sup> merely rehearse many of the explorations of postmodern dance in the context of a new era.<sup>11</sup> For example, the French choreographer Emmanuelle Huynh has drawn on strategies borrowed from one of the key figures in 1970s contact improvisation, Lisa Nelson, to create some of her collaborative work.<sup>12</sup>

Similar to the dance critics I cited above, Frédéric Pouillaude declares that there is no "epochal figuration" (2007, 125) for concert dance today; there is no unified, identifiable aesthetic for contemporary dance.<sup>13</sup> He goes on, however, to identify a "new French scene" (125) and to ascribe five attributes to this new scene: the dissolution of institutionalized dance companies, works that are created and then recreated to adapt to the particulars of a certain venue, improvisatory dances that follow an adaptable score rather than set notation, a questioning of what counts as dance performance, a reflexivity about dance as spectacle. What is central to Pouillaude's "mutation" (134), this new shift, is a preoccupation with contingency and relationality (i.e., dances made via fleeting collaborations; dances created only for their immediate local conditions and not repeated; dances that are self-conscious about process). This preoccupation, he asserts, is what makes contemporary dance contemporary, not in a historical sense, not contemporaneous in time, but in an "extra- or parahistorical sense" (134). Thus, Pouillaude resists "contemporary" as a distinct artistic period while at the same time describing an aesthetics of contemporary dance that is tied to a temporal attitude. This is not unlike Lepecki's (2012) definition of dance itself as intrinsically contemporary, although Pouillaude attributes an attitude of contemporaneity not to dance-as-ontology, but specifically to the contemporary (French) concert dance scene:

As for our mutation, it would be neither modern, nor postmodern. It would be *contemporary*, in an extra- or parahistorical sense. It would attempt to take into

consideration the necessary *contemporaneity* of the performance (which is not an essential feature but an accident); it would try to reflect in its very work what it is to expose the contingent coexistence of those who are doing and those who are not. Two motifs are then tied together: the *presence* (the necessary eventhood of that which can only give itself in an act), and the contingency (the dialectic insufficiency of the neutral simultaneity), motifs that our mutation attempts to raise to self-consciousness. (Pouillade 2007, 134)

I note Pouillade's discussion of contemporary dance as characterized by contemporaneity (presence, contingency) in order to underscore how complex and multivalent our uses and understandings of the term "contemporary" in contemporary dance are. As I will discuss below, the temporal attitude Pouillade identifies in contemporary concert dance is not shared in contemporary commercial dance.

## Contemporary Commercial Dance

Contemporary dance as it is practiced in the commercial/competitive dance world can often appear very similar to contemporary concert dance at the level of movement vocabulary, but mostly it does not share the aesthetic or political motivations of concert dance, nor even the same temporal awareness. Epitomized by the US American television show *So You Think You Can Dance*, contemporary commercial dance is often emotive, dramatic, and virtuosic. It is most often normatively gendered and decidedly heterosexual. It is usually performed to pop music and dramatizes the lyrics of the song (and thus is often conflated with or related to "lyrical dance"). It is often narrative or character driven. One online dance periodical describes it this way: "Chances are there are leaps and some eye-popping acrobatic tricks. The dancers are usually trained in ballet and jazz technique and able to lift their legs super high. The woman is generally wearing a short, empire waist dress and the man often forgets his shirt" (Wozny 2010).

In terms of technique there is certainly resemblance and crossover between commercial and concert contexts.<sup>14</sup> From a dance studio's class descriptions and the material taught, it can be difficult to determine whether a particular contemporary class is geared toward the commercial or the concert dance genre. Different studios develop different descriptive and taxonomic systems for identifying their classes, many of them quite confusing. Edge, a well-known Los Angeles studio for commercial dance, lists "contemporary jazz" but not "contemporary" as one of its class styles, but in looking through the class schedule only "contemporary" is offered. As part of my research for this paper, I took a contemporary dance class at Edge. The dance phrase we practiced could easily be taught in a concert dance class, but the qualities emphasized, the ways we were taught, the professional knowledge the teacher offered were what distinguished the class. The phrase was choreographed specifically to each sentence in the pop song (One Republic's "Counting Stars") that accompanied us; qualitative emphasis was placed on emotive characterization; the warm-up was more like a "boot camp" workout, with no time given to discuss anatomical alignment, internal energetic principles, or our "natural bodies," as is common in a concert dance class; rather, the teacher talked a good deal about "making it in the business." Meanwhile, another studio in Los Angeles designates its classes as "Experimental Contemporary" in order to distinguish its offerings from the kind of contemporary dance found at Edge. Broadway Dance Center in New York City, in an opposite move to Edge, lists "contemporary" as an umbrella genre, while all the classes on the schedule parse the term differently: commercial contemporary, contemporary lyrical, contemporary fusion, contemporary jazz, and contemporary floorwork. The term is clearly highly malleable.

Other studios retain the not fully satisfying term "modern" to designate the concert dance focus of their classes, just as the student hip hop dancers argue we should do at UC Berkeley. Adding to the confusion, the Martha Graham school is titled the "Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance." Some studios offer both modern and contemporary or even "Modern/Contemporary,"

while the actual distinctions among the classes are difficult to parse.<sup>15</sup> I interviewed Kristen Jacobson, the director at Alonzo King LINES Dance Center in San Francisco (Jacobson 2015). She recently reclassified some of their offerings into either contemporary or modern. She explains that she has a working definition of each: modern is based in a specific lineage like Graham or Limon; contemporary must have ballet at its core but can pull from a range of other influences, especially jazz and sometimes hip hop or world dance forms. At the same time, she admits that allocating a certain teacher to one or the other category is, in fact, a little arbitrary. While her designations make sense theoretically, in practice there are very few teachers teaching pure modern dance as she has defined it. I believe that the underlying distinction, the unwritten but understood code, is that “modern” means classes following a high art, conceptual, avant-garde concert dance tradition and set of values, while contemporary classes embrace work and values that are more geared to the commercial and the popular.<sup>16</sup> Peridance, a studio in New York City, also offers both modern and contemporary. I would argue that its distinction between the two forms is, as in LINES, ambiguous. On Peridance’s website, the directors explain that their contemporary faculty offer “the current trends in concert and commercial dance” and that their modern classes “integrate traditional modern disciplines (such as Graham, Horton, and Limon) with the most innovative styles being created by today’s choreographers” (Peridance Capezio Center 2017). I want to note that at both LINES and Peridance, modern is attached to a historical lineage whereas contemporary is seemingly ahistorical. I will take up this issue in more detail below.



Pop artist Beyoncé offers an example of the ways that commercial and concert dance are similar in form, but distinct in motivation. In 2011 she was reprimanded for producing a music video for her song “Countdown” that stole, phrase for phrase, cut for cut, choreography from Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker’s piece, *Rosas Danst Rosas*, based on a film of the piece made by Thierry de Mey. While the film was an experiment in repetitive breakdown and a “feminine stance on sexual expression” (McKinley 2011), the music video capitalized on hypersexuality.<sup>17</sup> In one section of Beyoncé’s video, she and the dancers replicate exactly the head tosses and shoulder rolls of De Keersmaeker/Mey. The qualitative difference is that there is a rawness and underlying aggression to the way De Keersmaeker’s dancers execute the movements and an individuality to each dancer, while Beyoncé and her dancers, in bright saturated colors, polish the moves and remove the irony. In other words, while the choreography of the two pieces is the same, the intentions are contrary, thus making one work avant-garde and the other pop. De Keersmaeker’s choreography borrows ironically from popular dance, and then popular dance borrows it back. Discussions in the legal world suggest that because the dynamics and the context of the two dances are different, Beyoncé’s version might not be an infringement of copyright (Yeoh 2013a, 2013b). Despite being constituted by exactly the same choreography, the dances are distinct. Parsing the difference between commercial and concert contemporary dance requires attention to attitude, valuation, venue, identity of the choreographer, and expectations of the audience.

Besides political attitude and aesthetic motivation, another distinction between concert and commercial dance is their different attitude toward history and temporality. As I stated in the preceding section, contemporary concert dance is quite often explicitly conscious of its modern and postmodern dance heritage. I suggest that postmodern dance is less characterized by a distinct movement vocabulary and more by artistic imperatives—imperatives that are not of interest to commercial dancemakers. Yvonne Rainer’s famous 1965 “No Manifesto,” written as a response to the prevailing aesthetics of the time, namely, ballet and modern, has since become a defining hallmark of postmodern dance (even though the term “postmodern dance” came to name the work of Rainer and her contemporaries only more than decade later). The manifesto, it turns out, says “no” to much of what contemporary commercial dance says “yes” to: spectacle, virtuosity, glamour, seduction, star image, etc.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, many contemporary concert dance artists are deeply influenced by these historic resistances.

Commercial dance’s indifference to postmodern dance is not only aesthetic, however; it also confirms its ahistoricism, which is in contradistinction to contemporary concert dance. Elizabeth Freeman

(2010) posits a notion of queer temporality, an anachronous, asynchronous crossing to and between other times, as a form of resistance to heteronormative, capitalist-driven linear time. Giorgio Agamben discusses “contemporariness” (not “contemporaneity,” which he connotes as being of the current time) as a “singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it, and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it” (2009, 41). Agamben’s contemporariness might be practiced at any period in history; what characterizes it is a reflective consciousness of the present and its relation to a time beyond. Art historian Richard Meyer (2013) sees this kind of contemporariness in contemporary art. I suggest that a good deal of contemporary concert dance also engages in this crossing of time, citing and circling back to the past, calling itself “contemporary modern” or “post-postmodern,” and recycling/re-envisioning postmodern tropes. In “Undoing Postmodern Dance History,” Ramsay Burt (2004) argues that much dance historiography tends to depict distinct periods in dance development as if each new period completely undoes the aesthetics of its predecessors, without looking back. In particular, he criticizes the ways that postmodern dance has been perceived as a complete overturning of the aesthetic preoccupations of modern dance. In contrast, he exemplifies a selection of European contemporary dance choreographers (the collective Quattuor Albrecht Knust and the artists Martin Nachbar, Tom Plischke, and Alice Chauchat) for the ways that they engage intimately with dances of the past via unconventional and “unfaithful” experiments in reconstruction. Using art historian Mieke Bal’s term, “preposterous history,” he argues that these contemporary choreographers’ experiments are forms of practice-based research that enable “both dancers and audiences of the present to understand their relations with dancers and audiences in the past” (Burt 2004). He maintains that this “contemporary view” “strips away the ‘presentist’ pretensions of the terms modern, postmodern, and contemporary, refocusing dancers’ and audiences’ attention on dance as embodied knowledge and perception within the specificity of its social and cultural context” (Burt 2004). Further examples of Burt’s “contemporary view” include Emmanuelle Huynh (a member of the Quattuor Albrecht Knust collective), who, as I mentioned above, draws on improvisatory strategies developed by postmodern contact improviser Lisa Nelson. Huynh also published a book of interviews with Trisha Brown (Huynh, Luccioni, and Perrin 2012), where, noting their generational difference, they compare their artistic approaches and their filiations. As another example, in 2016, Danspace Project in New York City launched a series called *Lost and Found* that retrospectively examined dance work, especially by queer artists and artists of color, from the 1980s HIV/AIDS era and put that work in conversation with the work and voices of contemporary dance creators.<sup>19</sup> One element of the project involved compiling dossiers on artists who had died of AIDS and asking young artists to interpret these dossiers choreographically from their contemporary stance.

On the other hand, commercial dance tends not to cite modern or postmodern dance much, despite movement vocabulary that resembles these forms.<sup>20</sup> A review of several commercial dance studio websites from across the US suggests that commercial contemporary dance is understood as a catholic genre with no particular allegiance to any one aesthetic tradition or historical lineage.<sup>21</sup> These studios tend to emphasize the newness, the “anything goes” attitude, and the pure emotive objective of contemporary dance, thus placing it in the seemingly spontaneous present tense of neoliberalism—commercial contemporaneity rather than Agamben’s (2009) reflexive contemporariness or Freeman’s queer temporality. In addition to contemporary concert dance’s interest in historicity, recall also that while commercial dance privileges spectacle and virtuosity, contemporary concert dance’s preoccupations with process also infuse it with a temporality that is, according to Pouillaude (see above), in the “extra- or parahistorical sense” (2007, 134). Thus, while contemporary commercial dance tends to disregard temporal awareness, contemporary concert dance is both historically sensitive and self-consciously time-based.

## Contemporary World Dance

In widening the lens to consider dance practices that happen outside the West, it is important to remember the fraught nature of temporal terms such as “contemporary” and “modern” and the

ways that they are often linked with the geographical and cultural, that is, with the West. In non-Western dance, “contemporary” is a necessary qualifier when we do not mean to refer to traditional forms. Without it “Asian dance,” “African dance,” or “Native American dance” is immediately assumed to be traditional. Another way to think about this is that “Asian” becomes the necessary qualifier for contemporary work that comes from Asia because “contemporary dance” is otherwise assumed to be Western. Thus, “Asia” is yoked to “traditional” and “contemporary” is yoked to “Western.” It is difficult for choreographers to be both Asian and contemporary. As Yutian Wong notes, the perception persists that “the Asian body is historical rather than contemporary” (2010, 13).

In outlining various understandings of contemporary world dance below I will focus foremost on my arena of knowledge, which is contemporary Asian dance. Though I would argue that many of the phenomena I discuss likely resemble predicaments in other non-Western dance contexts, I am wary of overgeneralizing about dance practices that range across a huge swath of the globe. For this reason I will confine my discussion primarily to Asia, which is already a highly general category.

Some distinctions might be made depending upon the ordering of the qualifiers that precede the word “dance.” “Asian contemporary dance” is often just Western contemporary dance performed by Asian dancers. In this case “contemporary dance” is understood as an artistic genre; it is the form dominated by Euro-American dance artists and perceived as merely “imitated” by non-Western dancers. Dance scholar and Odissi dancer Ananya Chatterjea bemoans her repeated experiences at Asian dance festivals, noting that works chosen in the “contemporary” category look like generic Euro-American contemporary dance with little or no culturally specific markers. She says, “What seems to be increasingly popular in the sphere of Asian ‘contemporary’ dance is a kind of ventriloquism, where contemporary Asia finds its voice through the signifiers of the Euro-American modern/postmodern, the latter passing once again as the neutral universal, which is able to contain all difference” (2013, 11). Contemporary work by dancers from outside the West must always be qualified with a geographic signifier, even if their work is generically Euro-American. And, in that case, audiences like Chatterjea view them as unsatisfyingly derivative.

Meanwhile, the category of “contemporary Asian dance” might be said to encompass both the temporal and the aesthetic connotations of “contemporary.” Aesthetically, it usually refers to work that incorporates Western contemporary dance into a local form. Thus, contemporary Asian dance can include a spectrum of intercultural dance work, from primarily Western contemporary choreography with trappings of Asian-ness to various fusions of Western movement vocabularies and structures with Asian energetic principles and gestural languages. Ting-Ting Chang (2015) compares two versions of *The Rite of Spring* by Chinese choreographers Zhang Xiaoxiong and Shen Wei. Focusing on their differing negotiations with Chineseness, she argues that Zhang’s 2008 piece expresses a Chinese cultural nostalgia via the language of Western contemporary dance while Shen’s 2004 choreography fuses Western contemporary dance with Chinese movement aesthetics. Interestingly, Chang notes that while Zhang believes in the power of Western contemporary dance to transcend borders and speak for local experiences (what Chatterjea critiques as “the neutral universal” [2013, 11]), alternatively Shen’s hybrid Chinese-Western movement language succeeds in being both culturally specific but also transferable to the non-Chinese bodies in his company.<sup>22</sup> Choreographer Lin Hwai-min of Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan exemplifies the range of what might be considered contemporary Chinese dance. He began in the 1970s working foremost via the movement language of Martha Graham while addressing Chinese/Taiwanese content. Over the past few decades he has gradually developed a bodily technique that draws upon Western contemporary dance, ballet, Chinese martial arts, and a local Taiwanese form of *taiqi*. Dance scholar Yatin Lin (2014) uses the doubly connotative term “flexible” to describe the hybrid bodily intelligence that Lin’s dancers must master. Like the Cloud Gate dancers, a great number of dance students in dance academies across East, Southeast, and South Asia are currently training in multiple forms: their local traditional, folk, and classical forms, as well as ballet and Western modern/

contemporary.<sup>23</sup> As a result, the choreographic works they are creating range across a variety of East-West blends, all of which might be termed “contemporary Asian dance.”

And how shall we consider practitioners of traditional world dance forms who are innovating *within* their tradition, without adopting the shapes of Western contemporary dance? In other words, what about “contemporary” as a temporal qualifier? Because contemporariness is so often barred to artists from beyond the West, innovations in various world dance practices can go unacknowledged. Nicholas Rowe (2009) argues that the term “contemporary” is not useful to describe developments in Palestinian dance, precisely because the term always puts the non-Western artist within the framework of the West, as either resistant to or yielding to Western aesthetic values. Chatterjea likewise grapples with the universalizing hegemony of contemporary dance technique:

I found myself confronted with one question repeatedly: How could I consider my work contemporary if I was still using footwork and hand gestures? . . . Every time, the suggestion lurking around the corner was that “contemporary” choreography had a particular look, and other imaginings of what might be described as contemporary had to translate into those terms in order to be recognized as such. (2013, 10)

For Chatterjea, when placed in front of “world dance,” “contemporary” loses its broad temporal meaning and becomes a dominant set of Euro-American aesthetics that serves to subsume and/or exclude even as it claims to welcome. African-born choreographer Nora Choupamire echoes this idea: “The term ‘contemporary’ is a mystification, crafted in Europe, in the West, in a way. In the end it’s always a way of claiming a universal value in dance—either you’re in it or you’re out” (Choupamire quoted in Lefebvre 2012).

On the more positive side, Ketu Katrak (2011) considers how Indian dance is not an imitation of Western dance by Indian bodies, but can be contemporary outside the bounds of a Western model (even if some of the developments include Western influences). She accepts the term “contemporary” even as she recognizes that it can refer to a Western historical and artistic framework. She contends that the word nonetheless

remains appropriate for use in an Indian context despite its English-language origin and Western connotations. After all, one must recognize the legacy of nearly 200 years of British colonial history embedded within Indian culture. Further, the word “contemporary” has the advantage of suggesting to a dancer that s/he is free to experiment with traditional dance, whose grammar and idiom are part of their Indian heritage, or incorporate multiple styles outside the Indian dance world. . . . They deterritorialize artistic forms, lending them a kind of universal expressivity and accessibility that can be appreciated by spectators in any part of the world. (2011, 8)

Likewise, in their anthology on Cambodian dance, editors Stephanie Burrridge and Fred Frumberg (2010) discuss contemporary developments in classical Cambodian dance without any reference to Western contemporary dance. Here the temporal understanding of the term “contemporary” as “new” or “of the moment” is presumed rather than its conflation with a specific Western aesthetic. Burrridge and Frumberg assess innovations within Cambodian dance that are internal to the forms themselves. In fact, in an article included in their anthology, Frumberg notes that most audiences not already familiar with Cambodian dance would not recognize the contemporary developments within it:

So faithful is the work to the classical form that only the most seasoned connoisseur will notice the nuances in the choreography. However, when viewed in its entirety,

the bridge it creates between the classical and contemporary worlds are at once very new, subtle and significant and by the very definition, contemporary, yet, at its heart, faithful to the classical form. (2010, 148)

Of course, it should be a given that any world dance form, like any art form at all, never remains frozen in an unchanged and always “authentic” state. Using the term “contemporary” merely emphasizes this fact; it reminds us that art making is shaped by, and speaks to, its current time and place.

Nevertheless, while Burrige and Frumberg focus on local concerns and developments in Cambodia, the world dancer who travels abroad must negotiate a delicate balance between being contemporary and being traditional. She must look sufficiently different *and* enough the same in order to be legible on Euro-American stages. While Katrak (2011) celebrates the deterritorializing potential of the term “contemporary,” Royona Mitra argues that in order for an art form to be contemporary it must first be Westernized (2015, 9). Chatterjea argues that the world dancer never gets to be “universal”:

There is a strange disjunction here between how, even as the technique, aesthetic, and structure deterritorializes these bodies—marks them as part of a shifting landscape that insist on being made over in approximations of a viable “globality,” program notes and publicity efforts that emphasize where these bodies originate from reterritorialize them. (2013, 14)

In her recently completed dissertation, Heather Rastovac profiles a contemporary Iranian dancer in her efforts to audition for the long-established San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival. Her work was repeatedly rejected for not being “really Persian” (2016, 71). Rastovac aptly reads this as a desire on the part of the world dance market to present imagined perceptions of ethnic dance within a fixed rubric of pastness and exotic difference.

At the same time, Rastovac notes that contemporary Iranian dancemakers are also marginalized from the mainstream Euro-American dance community. She explains how the same dancer who was repeatedly rejected from the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival also could not find acceptance in university dance departments. She was frequently told that she might inquire in the ethnomusicology or anthropology departments (Rastovac 2016, 74–75).

On the other side of the market, non-Western choreographers also struggle for legitimacy in their own communities and can often be accused of betraying their art forms if they consort with the Western art market. For example, Burrige and Frumberg’s (2010) primary challenge is not to consider contemporary Cambodian dance in relation to Euro-American contemporary dance, but to think through the tension between innovation and the intense cultural and political importance of preservation in postcolonial, post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia. In many postcolonies the symbolic, nationalist significance of their artistic traditions makes gestures toward change tricky. Likewise, many diasporic communities in the West often rely on their traditional dance forms to serve as a form of cultural identification, an expression of cultural pride, and a vehicle for cultural transmission to second, third, and fourth generations. Contemporizations of these forms can be viewed as threatening to these aims.<sup>24</sup>

Once again, we are reminded that although “contemporary” broadly signifies current time, in the dance world (and in other arts worlds) it becomes attached to specific cultural notions that are reserved for Euro-American artists, and thus the term is fraught with expectations, exclusions, and prejudices. Whether ethnic dance artists innovate entirely within their own tradition, and even when they fuse their tradition with Western dance vocabulary, in fact, even when they

choreograph exclusively in the Western contemporary idiom, they often are not afforded full access to Euro-American stages.

## Conclusion

“Contemporary dance” evokes both recognition and anxiety across concert, commercial, and world dance stages. For some, it is the avant-garde, process-based concert dance form evolved from modern and postmodern dance. For others, it is the dramatic, virtuosic commercial form drawn from ballet and jazz and popularized by the television show *So You Think You Can Dance*. In the world dance market, “contemporary dance” can encompass a range of practices: Western contemporary dance performed by non-Western dancers, ethnic dance fused with Western contemporary vocabulary and/or compositional techniques, or innovations on a traditional non-Western form.

If we adopt “contemporary” as exclusively a temporal designation, this presumably opens up the field to all current dance practices. And Lepecki, after all, argues that contemporaneity is an ontological feature of dance in general, beyond its presence in current time (2012). I would contend, however, that generalizing all dance as contemporary, whether as a period designation or because it is a time-based medium, risks giving the term no real locus of identification, no way to mark the social, cultural, or political significance of a moment in history. Pouillaude (2007) identifies the current dance scene as “contemporary” because of its specific aesthetic commitments to presence and contingency. Burt (2004) likewise characterizes the “contemporary view” in today’s concert dance world as particularly preoccupied with “preposterous history”, or what Agamben would call “contemporariness”—a reflexive consciousness of the present. If, however, we localize and delimit “contemporary” as designating a coherent set of aesthetics performed by an exclusive set of artists, then we relegate so many other forms and communities to being “not contemporary.”

I am not arguing that we can disambiguate the temporal and aesthetic valences of the word “contemporary” as it relates to dance. As I note in the section on world dance above, even when the term is only meant to signal a temporal valence, aesthetic expectations attach themselves. Certainly, we could use other terms when we want to emphasize either present era or specific style: “of the moment” or “current”; “experimental” or “lyrical.” I am merely remarking that the multivalent meaning of the term leads us to question the intertwined relationship between artistic style and presumptions about artistic development as well as the political implications of this intertwining. It is important to remember the ethnocentric bias that underlies the yoking of the temporal and the aesthetic and that conflates contemporaneity with the West. The contending valences of the term “contemporary” across the three contexts of concert, commercial, and world dance reveal particular attitudes: about what counts as “high art,” how art markets function, how gender and sexuality norms are reinforced, how colonialism casts its shadow, to share a few examples. As a result of these complexities and the politics they engender, our department has not yet made a decision on renaming our dance technique classes!

## Notes

Parts of this article were previously published in Kwan (2016). That short paper is a printing of an oral presentation the author gave at UC Berkeley in March 2015. It is not a peer-reviewed or edited essay. I am grateful to Peggy Cheng, Nancy Ellis, Maura Nguyen Donohue, Jenefer Johnson, Paige Johnson, Anthea Kraut, Heather Rastovac Akbarzadeh, Rebecca Rossen, Yutian Wong, and Lisa Wymore for graciously helping me think through the ideas in this article.

1. Our dance program bears the legacy of the two esteemed dancers who founded it in the 1960s: David Wood and Marni Thomas Wood. The Woods had danced with Martha Graham,

and so under their long and deeply committed stewardship (I studied under them from 1988 to 1992) our technique classes fell solidly under the category of “modern dance.”

2. A brief review of university dance department websites shows that Purchase College, a well-established dance program in upstate New York, designates its classes, “Modern Technique.” Likewise, the University of Minnesota, the University of California, Riverside, and the University of Washington also classify their classes as “Modern Technique.” Meanwhile, the dance department at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University offers classes in “Contemporary Dance.” The University of North Carolina School of the Arts also offers “Contemporary Dance.”

3. A recent collection offers provocative theorizations of “world dance.” The anthology critiques the constitution of world dance at our historical moment, thinking through its inclusions and exclusions and the ways that, as a constructed category, it reflects and shapes institutional investments, market forces, and ethnocentric ideologies, desires, and assumptions; see Susan Leigh Foster (2009).

4. In researching this paper, I discovered a book aptly titled, *Contemporary Dance*. It turns out the book as written in 1978 and covered what we now categorize as postmodern dance; see Anne Livet (1978).

5. Shannon Jackson (2014) reminds us that determinations of what is radical and what is conventional depend on the framings we bring to each artistic genre. What is radical about theater to a visual art audience may be completely within the expected conventions for a theater audience and vice versa.

6. Consider, for example, Akram Khan, who draws from Indian kathak dance; Hervé Koubi, who has used capoeira and hip hop, or Hofesh Schechter, who also draws from street dance. There is a significant history of dance artists in the west drawing on non-Western dance forms to invigorate their work. Many major modern and postmodern dance figures appropriated nonwestern practices. The ways that today’s contemporary artists incorporate nonwestern forms ranges from the culturally sensitive to the blithely appropriative; see Jane Desmond (1991), SanSan Kwan (2014), Priya Srinivasan (2007), Yutian Wong (2010).

7. Foster (1997) argues that today’s dancers are increasingly required to train in a range of styles and techniques, rather than specializing in a single movement tradition or choreographer’s aesthetic. This is because the field is more mobile, and fewer choreographers are supporting full-time companies, thus dancers must be hireable for a range of dance projects. Anusha Kedhar (2014) extends this idea to discuss South Asian dancers who must hone “flexible bodies” in order to master both Indian dance forms as well as western contemporary dance in order to be marketable to Western audiences and choreographers.

8. In fact, contemporary concert dance so often includes spoken text that it almost seems false to separate out “dance theater” as its own genre today; see Belmar (2015).

9. See, for example, Birringer (2011), Franko and Lepecki (2014).

10. As Birringer rhetorically asks, “Have we not seen these operations before? The sincere authentic gesture, the chance procedure, the everyday movement improvisation, the infantile regression, the arrogant posture of provocation, the refusal to dance, the self-reflexive turn?” (2005, 12).

11. For sources that attempt to define contemporary dance see: Burt (2017), Kolb (2013), Lepecki (2004; 2012), Pontbriand (2014), Pouillaude (2007), Solomon (2013).

12. For example, see her piece with Akira Kasai, entitled *Spiel* (2011), or her piece with Eiko Otake, entitled *Talking Duet* (2015).

13. Pouillaude (2016) notes in a later article that the past twenty years of conceptual and self-reflexive work in contemporary dance is giving way to work that documents extrachoreographic material, that is interested in historical and social events and political realities.

14. I am inspired here by the unpublished work of Sara Linck-Frenz who, through a UC Berkeley Haas Undergraduate Scholarship, researched a project on the interrelationships between commercial and concert dance.

15. See, for example, Dance Empire in Miami, Florida: <http://danceempire.com>; the Studio of Dance in Fairview Park, Ohio: <http://www.thestudioofdancefp.com/>; and Inspire Dance Studio in

La Cañada, California: <http://inspire-dancestudio.com/>. Studio A Dance and Performing Arts in Avon, Connecticut, offers a class called Modern/Contemporary: <http://inspire-dancestudio.com/>. All websites last accessed August 9, 2017.

16. LINES Ballet and the other dance company Jacobson has worked for, Hubbard Street Dance, straddle the line between concert dance and commercial work. Hubbard Street circulates in the concert dance realm, but the company's roots are in jazz dance and its work tends to be more virtuosic and accessible than avant-garde and conceptual.

17. For a side-by-side comparison of the two works see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDT0m514TMw>, and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXE6rM0d3jg&index=3&list=RDPDT0m514TMw>. Accessed August 9, 2017.

18. I am grateful to Anthea Kraut for this observation.

19. See <http://www.danspaceproject.org/journal/issue-4-lost-found-dance-new-york-hivaidsthen-and-now/>. Accessed August 9, 2017.

20. For example, Nancy Wozny, writes for *Dance Spirit*, an online magazine for commercial dance: "Plenty of contemporary choreographers who work in ballet and commercial dance arenas have no background in traditional forms of modern dance at all, and usually they don't come from the college track, where they'd have taken Lester Horton or Paul Taylor classes. If you come from a competition studio, your class schedule may read only jazz, ballet, lyrical and tap. In a ballet academy, you might get an occasional dose of modern, but not on a regular basis" (2010).

21. See, for example, Dance Empire in Miami, Florida: <http://danceempire.com>; Danceworks in Milwaukee, Wisconsin: <http://danceworksmke.org/classes/style/>; Balance Dance Studios in Austin, Texas: <http://www.balancedancestudios.com/adult-dance-class-descriptions/#contemporary-dance>; All That and Jazz in Dumfries, Virginia: <https://www.allthatandjazz.com/class-descriptions/>. All websites last accessed August 10, 2017.

22. Describing Zhang, she says, "In Zhang's *Rite of Spring*, with contemporary dance as a medium, he uses Western dance techniques as his language, and also focuses on the relationship between the movement and music to express his personal feelings and story. Zhang mentioned in his interview that, for him, the body's language could transcend cultural borders" (Chang 2015, 5). By contrast, about Shen she writes, "By examining his aesthetic visions and creative processes for *Rite of Spring*, I suggest that the Chinese dancing body has become a cultural hybrid in today's contemporary dance world and Shen Wei has created and transferred this cultural hybrid dancing body to the non-Chinese dancers successfully" (Chang 2015, 8).

23. See Mohd and Burridge (2011), Lin (2014), and Larasati (2013)

24. Nicolas Rowe rejects the term contemporary, as I discuss above, and instead suggests the term, "post-salvagism" to describe the ways that art forms develop across time in postcolonial regions: "for communities around the world that have suffered cultural dislocation, particularly for those under (or emerging from) colonial domination, the concept of post-salvagism may resonate and provide a platform from which to view, and be inspired by, their own cultural evolution." (Rowe 2009, 60). "Post-salvagism" suggests a move away from the salvagist, preservationist anxieties often characteristic of postcolonial societies.

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