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Philippine Contemporary Dance and  
Narratives of the Nation**

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## **DANCING A NATION: PHILIPPINE CONTEMPORARY DANCE AND NARRATIVES OF THE NATION**

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So much has been written about the nation vis-à-vis other fields in the humanities, literature in particular. My interest in dance lies in its peculiar location within and vis-à-vis the discourse of the nation. An ephemeral form, dance has elicited various, and even contradictory, valuations; most of the time it is considered a mere form of entertainment. It is undeniable, though, that dance has articulated and informed our ideas of the nation and nationhood. In this paper, I explore how three contemporary dance companies based in Quezon City (The University of the Philippines Dance Company, Airdance, and Dance Forum) have rendered their imaginings of the Philippine nation. I focus on Philippine contemporary dance because as a cultural practice, I believe that it has choreographed the many trajectories and issues embodied in the Philippines's imagining of itself. A number of choreographies by the three companies mobilize motifs, forms, structures, and styles that constitute and signify the Philippine nation; they have, in effect imagined a "national identity." It is my hypothesis that Philippine contemporary dance offers a space within which the narrative of the nation, one which is different from that deployed by the state, is created. Such space opened by contemporary dance in the country has been selflessly offered by talented choreographers who have, despite meager state support, been persistently creating works under formidable conditions. These contemporary dance choreographers have fleshed out a vision and philosophy of dance rooted in Philippine realities.

*Keywords: contemporary dance, culture, choreography, Dance Forum, UP Dance Company, Airdance*

IN THE AGE of intense globalization in contemporary Southeast Asia, when national borders have purportedly given way to the fluid movement of economic goods, peoples, and cultural practices, it cannot be denied that nations have constantly had to strike a balance between strengthening their identities and facing the demands of the ever-changing socio-political, economic, and cultural re-alignments around the world. Cultural practices are thus always implicated in greater cultural and political networks and find themselves caught in axes of conflicts that are manifestations of the still powerful idea of the nation despite, or because, of the controversial nature of the discourse on globalization. The reconfiguration of power relations among nations has precisely resulted, not in the “transcending of nations” but in the reassertion of national borders. Thus, the nation as a discursive practice continues to be the crucible of many cultural, historical, socio-political, religious, economic, gender, racial, and sexual discourses.

So much has been written about the nation vis-à-vis other fields in the humanities, literature in particular. My interest in dance lies in its peculiar location within and vis-à-vis the discourse of the nation. An ephemeral form, dance has elicited various, and even contradictory, valuations; most of the time it is considered a mere form of entertainment. It is undeniable, though, that dance has articulated and informed our ideas of the nation and nationhood. Seemingly marginal to other forms of arts and cultural practices, dance has always been embedded in our daily lives, as performance or otherwise. This notwithstanding, it has not been extensively “discoursed” about. Aside from the works on traditional Philippine dances as expressions of the Filipino identity—our folk dance groups have earned international recognition through the years—seldom have other dances in the country been extensively studied as performances of the nation.<sup>1</sup> Also, historian, critic, and choreographer Esteban “Steve” Villaruz (a.k.a. Basilio) laments that “Folk dances are mainly aimed at public display more than for social expression” (2006, 222). I chose my area of study because contemporary dance in the Philippines, with choreographers who have created works that interweave literature, film, dance, history, and politics, has gained a stronger and more visible presence in the past decades.

In 2000, Villaruz observed that:

. . . now senior dancers see creative opportunities elsewhere. . . it seems after setting up the establishment, dancers dare to be themselves and find alternative angles about dance outside familiar expectations. . . [where in the 50s folk dance achieved worldwide recognition, the 60s started professionalization, the 70s ensconced activity at the Cultural

Center of the Philippines]. . . This seems to be a new phase in Philippine dance, where artists let loose to unearth new viewpoints. . . Perhaps that is what artists now outside CCP's stable seek for us—for the Philippines' next dance thrust. (in Beltran 2005, n.p.)

Ten years hence, these contemporary dance choreographers have indeed “let loose” and embodied different viewpoints. One just has to see the number of works performed during the annual Wifi Body Independent Contemporary Festival and the Contemporary Dance Map, a performance-tour of alternative spaces for dance and what choreographers in the regions have been producing under the most challenging conditions. And in the last ten years, a number of articulations of these fresh perspectives have been renderings and imaginings of the Philippine nation. It is thus necessary to study and write about them as valuable contributions to our national discourse. “Discoursing” on dance, in particular Philippine contemporary dance in the twenty-first century, will yield a rich discussion on how it sees itself as an integral part of the stories about the nation and how this very dance form's story of emergence and survival in the Philippines is likewise emblematic of an art form's persistence despite the state's lack of support.

That the narrative of the nation<sup>2</sup> may be cathected to that of dance is not surprising considering how the latter, from its earliest form as ritual art, has remained an important part in the emergence of nation states and the process of modernization. Because the body is a powerful medium for expressing social values, it was important in the nationalist framework of modernization in the twentieth century—according to dance critics and historians, the “aura of the body” was embraced by national movements to represent and even solidify national values (Turner and Zheng 2009, 11).

Critics Bryan Turner and Zheng Yangwen cite a national ballet culture that enjoys state subsidy and how for example classical ballet endorsed by the elite has been questioned by “alternative expressions of nationalism in the form of folk traditions and peasant cultures” (Turner and Zheng 2009, 13). The story of the popularity of Philippine dance troupes in the 1930s is a good example of how the state invests in dance. In his book *The Day the Dancers Stayed* (2010), Theodore Gonzalves re-visits the works of Francisca Reyes Aquino, Helena Benitez, Jose Lardizabal, Lucrecia Urtula, and Isabel Santos, and situates them within a particular historical juncture to show the entanglement of the narrative of the nation with that of folk dance. Gonzalves analyzes the full support of University of the Philippines (UP) President Jorge Bocobo (1934-1939) of the efforts of the founding

scholar of folk dance, Reyes Aquino, as part of the University's enterprise to prove the Philippines's ability to stand proudly beside other nations. Bacobo decried the onslaught of Americanization—imported dances, songs, movies, and literature were chipping away at the Filipino identity (Gonzalves 2010, 39). Believing that the younger generation had to learn how to “perform their specific repertoire” with confidence and that a sense of nationalism had to be “internalized viscerally but exhibited kinetically” (ibid.), Bocobo recognized the crucial role Aquino would play in his plans. Aquino's academic career was fostered by Bocobo's administration—from her trips to the barrios in order to research on the folk dances to the writing of her M.A. thesis on Philippine folk dances and games in 1926. Gonzalves makes a significant observation of the 1930s as the decade when the curricular changes during the American occupation saw the emergence of folk dances as a crucial component of the PE program conceptualized by American teachers. Folk dances thus became “part of playground demonstrations, athletic meets, and schoolwide events” (ibid., 47). In line with Bacobo's vision, Aquino's teaching of folk dance—the UP Folk Song and Dance Club (the group was reorganized as the Filipiniana Dance Troupe after the Second World War and was supported by the US military)—was a means of “foster[ing] patriotism and nationalism” and “demonstrat[ing] the growth of Filipino culture through the evolution of Philippine dances” (ibid.).

And there are also several dance festivals (e.g., the *Dinagyang* of Iloilo, the *Sinulog* of Cebu, the *MassKara* of Bacolod, and the *Ati-Atihan* of Kalibo, Aklan) in the Philippines which highlight the multivalent cultural matrix of the Philippine nation. The dances performed in exhibitions and competitions—some are based on stories (i.e., both historical and literary) of the nation's colonial encounters—are performances of the Philippine state's discourse on the nation. These festivals have been incorporated in tourism projects like the WoW Philippines project in Intramuros and the Aliwan in Pasay City. Through the decades, these festivals have witnessed the various political and cultural trajectories and thrusts of the Philippine nation-state and its imagining and imaging of itself. It is interesting to note that quite a number of our contemporary dance choreographers have been involved in these festivals and that though the festivals are supported by the state/local government, the narratives of the nation embedded in the dances are not monolithic—they are nuanced, and could even be read as counter-narratives to the dominant narratives of the nation.

In the investments on dance cited above, we see that the state—whether its presence is felt in the form of an educational institutions' support for dance / dance troupe / dance research or in the form of government subsidy for dance festivals—

has indeed seen this art form as a possible ally promoting specific state interests, whether these be cultural, political, or economic. But a statement that claims such state interest in dance in the Philippines must be qualified. In the country, state support for the arts is felt only by a limited number of groups. Villaruz has already written about this and its implications on the issues of “representation,” “national identity,” and creativity. For decades, he has been vocal about the dangers inherent in the lopsided government support for two dance groups—the Bayanihan which became a national dance company in the 1990s and the Ballet Philippines which has been a favored company based in the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) and is perhaps about to be legislated into a national dance company. I mention this problem of state investment because it impinges on how we, as viewers, read the narratives of the nation articulated in the choreographies of “national dance companies.”

In “Stage/State-Managing: Ethnicity and Identity in Dance,” the questions Villaruz raises in relation to national dance companies is relevant to my concern with narratives of the nation deployed by the state. He asks: “Does the Bayanihan’s (and all other folk dance groups’) panoramic format and representational staging of the folk arts exemplify our regions? Are the Ifugao or Maranaw allowed their opinion or voice about an exhibition of their dances in Manila and abroad? (Villaruz 2006, 206).<sup>3</sup> Although he acknowledges the strength of Ballet Philippines, he likewise asks “why is it the group that’s preeminently entitled to project the Philippine image in creative dance worldwide?” (*ibid.*, 207). He continues:

On the levels of the municipal and provincial, and on to the national, how are cultural expressions proclaimed as official? How did the old sense of nation as people (and nations as peoples within one country) become what the state now proclaims it to be? Have ethnic expressions survived and changed in the context of a globalized perspective and projection? While these expressions have always been here, how have they changed in light of being utilized to promote identity-in-diversity? (*ibid.*)

Against this background (e.g., the nation projected in the choreographies of a national dance company like the Bayanihan), I would like to look at how Philippine contemporary dance has responded to the nation-state’s “narrative” (i.e., the state’s political and cultural discourses which have enabled it to project itself as a nation).<sup>4</sup> I focus on Philippine contemporary dance because as a cultural practice, I believe that it has choreographed the many trajectories and issues embodied in the Philippines’s imagining of itself. A number of choreographies of Philippine contemporary dance mobilize motifs, forms, structures, and styles that constitute

and signify the Philippine nation; they have, in effect, imagined a “national identity.” It is my hypothesis that Philippine contemporary dance offers a space within which the narrative of the nation, one which is different from that deployed by the state, is created. Considering that dance is also discourse, and as such is open to readings, the study will tease out how the choreographies may occupy refractory positions on the narrative/narration of the Philippine nation. Such space opened by contemporary dance in the country has been selflessly offered by talented choreographers who have, despite meager state support, been persistently creating works under formidable conditions. These contemporary dance choreographers have fleshed out a vision and philosophy of dance rooted in Philippine realities.

This paper will explore some of the works of contemporary dance performing groups based in Manila<sup>5</sup>: Dance Forum, Airdance, and the UP Dance Company (UPDC). Although there are numerous contemporary dance choreographers in the country, this paper will focus on the more “established” Metro Manila-based contemporary dance groups as an initial effort to trace the trajectories of contemporary dance and its narratives of the nation.

Because my study will have a multi-dimensional coverage of contemporary dance in the Philippines—as a cultural practice imbued with Philippine and Western aesthetics and caught between the nexus of the narratives of nationhood and identity—I will look at the elements of the choreographies (i.e., dynamics, space, dance form, theme, music, scenography, artistic impact, mode of production) and the narratives and ideas they articulate vis-à-vis their respective contexts and analyze the imagining of national subjectivities they render.

Tradition, transformation, literary interrelations, narrativity, choreography (and the body), and the various discourses that comprise contemporary dance in the Philippines are the key concepts that will constitute my project.

Thus, the discussion will address the following questions:

1. How has Philippine contemporary dance responded to the established narratives on the nation?
2. What refractory position has Philippine contemporary dance taken in the narrative of the Philippine nation?
3. What kind of narrative of the nation has Philippine contemporary dance “written”? How are these texts alternative “performances” of the Philippine nation?

It must be noted however, that contemporary dance in the Philippines has a mottled history; it has not only felt the low regard for dance in general, but also for contemporary dance, in particular. And among contemporary choreographers and dancers, there have been debates on what really constitutes “contemporary dance.”

My interviews with contemporary dance choreographers reveal the continuous problematization of the term “contemporary.” Yet, even if some of them refuse to provide a categorical definition of “contemporary dance,” a stance that fits well with the aesthetics and politics of contemporary dance, the descriptions and the theories they posit intersect. For convenience, however, I use the “definition” or descriptions of contemporary dance which scholar, critic, and choreographer Joseph Gonzales presents in his book *Choreography: A Malaysian Perspective* (2004). He uses the term “contemporary dance” to refer to various dance forms which are not considered “classical” (i.e., not just ballet but dances that are based on established systems of rules like the traditional dances of India and Thailand). The range includes different styles that use the vocabulary of modern dance associated with Graham, Cunningham, Hawkins, and Limon, “reinventions” of traditional dances in terms of “movement vocabulary, presentation and performance context,” styles that are characterized by “a fusion of different genres/cultures,” and dances that are “communicative and expressive” and are “visual, spatial, temporal, kinesthetic... sensual, affective, evocative, dynamic and rhythmic.” Thus contemporary dance is considered political as it generally “deals with change” and allows us to imagine processes which are important in conceiving “models” that will enable us to live in an ever-changing world (Gonzales 2004, vii-ix).

These characteristics are possible parameters in considering what is “contemporary.” Notwithstanding the convenient list of characteristics of contemporary dance, I am more inclined towards Myra Beltran’s view regarding the nature of contemporary dance:

There is really no ready-made answer for this (what is contemporary dance) because the process of defining contemporary, of defining dance itself, of working with actual bodies who live and breathe in contemporary times, makes the whole event, the experience, the total act and the total rite of discovering, contemporary dance. (Beltran 2002a, 2)

The following sections of the paper will be on the three Manila-based contemporary dance companies and an analysis of some of their works chosen to illustrate how contemporary choreographies could be rich and multi-layered narratives of the Philippine nation.



## Finding the Contemporary within an Academic Environment

Founded in 1987, the UPDC was envisioned to be the space for apprenticeship and professional training of UP dance majors. One of its founders, Steve Villaruz traces the long history of the company to the story of Dance Theater Philippines (DTP), one of the first two professional dance companies in the country (i.e., the other one, being Hariraya). Formed in 1968, the DTP supported its dancers from the “income” of their shows at the Rizal Theater, Philamlife Auditorium, and the Meralco Theater, and by allowing them to perform as back up dancers of the Pilita Corrales Show at ABS-CBN.

Julie Borromeo, one of the founders of DTP (with Felicitas “Tita” Layag-Radaic and Eddie Elejar) choreographed the jazz pieces of the dancers. The company was not as active as it used to be after the CCP’s inaugural season in 1969 with the *Mir-i-nisa* ballet (music by Eliseo Pajaro, story by Jose Garcia Villa, and choreography by Borromeo and Radaic). With less company productions, the dancers were thus free to perform with the premiere show of the Alice Reyes and Modern Dance Company (later called the CCP Dance Company, and presently known as Ballet Philippines). Eventually, these dancers joined the Reyes/CCP company which was then co-directed (and also co-founded) by Elejar. Villaruz explains that the loosely organized company allowed the members to teach elsewhere, thus enabling them to be more financially stable.

When Tita Radaic reorganized the DTP,<sup>6</sup> she housed it first at the Banawe, Quezon City dance studio of Noemi Estrella (now Mrs. Casiño), who was also a DTP member. The company then moved to the dance schools of Radaic in St. Theresa’s College in both Manila and Quezon City. Fully active in the dance scene, DTP had a series of tours in Hong Kong and the United Kingdom and eventually became the resident company of the UP College of Music in 1980 with members who were mostly UP students. Villaruz recounts that the extra fund they were given by Pres. Edgardo Angara created controversy, particularly from among the people in the field of theater. The issue was eventually settled under the Deanship of Ramon Santos.

DTP’s productions eventually became erratic and thus the company moved out of Diliman. It was Villaruz who thereafter established the UP Dance Company (UPDC), comprised of dance majors at the College of Music.<sup>7</sup> As a company, UPDC was visible in numerous campus productions, including those held at the Philamlife Auditorium; these productions were spearheaded by Jonathan Malicsi who was

then the Chair of the Committee on Culture of both UP Diliman and the entire UP system. The dancers were also active in workshops which took them to other UP campuses such as Baguio and the Visayas.

Thus, we cannot separate the history of UPDC from the checkered experience of an earlier professional group that found itself housed in the state university and eventually became its performing group. Also, the personalities who were the pillars of this early group were the very personalities who were behind the dance program—their dance experiences and philosophies, naturally influencing, if not the aesthetics of the present generation of dancers, at least their view of dance.

It is perhaps because UPDC is a company that has never been tied to the dance program,<sup>8</sup> that it has produced a wide range of performances through the years. Since its establishment,<sup>9</sup> the program has required students to take regular dance classes in ballet, modern, and contemporary, which have, in turn exposed the students to the techniques of Agnes Locsin and Esther Rimpas (Villaruz 2010). The theory and composition courses, on the other hand, have strengthened the dancers' understanding of dance as a field of study/discipline and, hence, its discourse.

If in the 1980s, the UPDC was strong in classical ballet, it has seen the strengthening of contemporary dance in recent years. Angel Lawenko-Baguilat, one of its present Artistic Directors, attributes this to the influence of Villaruz, now the company's Artistic Director Emeritus. It is not so much that Villaruz has trained the dancers in contemporary dance, but that he instilled in them the value of discovering their own vocabulary, not only as dancers but more importantly as choreographers. Herbert Alvarez, Lawengko-Baguilat's co-Artistic Director, agrees with her and further explains that the company does not push a certain aesthetics and gives all the dancers a chance to explore their strengths. Although he himself has trained in ballet and has a formalist approach to dance, this has not prevented him from recognizing the range of talents that the dance program has. Lawenko-Baguilat observes that while dancers from the Philippine High School for the Arts have a strong foundation in classical ballet,<sup>10</sup> those from the provinces are strong in modern dance.<sup>11</sup>

Because the UPDC has liberally worked with a range of dance backgrounds and bodies, it has found itself gaining strength in contemporary dance in the past years. The students who have graduated<sup>12</sup> and are now teaching company classes are contemporary dance choreographers so their students have more or less imbibed their aesthetics. This, and the dancers' exposure to the Contemporary Dance Map, a network of contemporary dance groups in the country, have enriched their

understanding of the principles and permutations of contemporary dance. Villaruz adds another reason for the UPDC's movement towards contemporary dance: economics. Because *pointe* shoes have become unaffordable to most dancers—a pair costs 3,500 pesos—they have opted for contemporary dance which does not only allow them to explore movement but also frees them from financial burden.

The productions analyzed below bear the confluence of factors, both economic and aesthetic, that have contributed to the creation of dance productions by the UPDC. True to the spirit of the company's respect for each choreographer's vocabulary and each dancer's strengths, UPDC has not imposed a definition for "contemporary dance." Both Lawenko-Baguilat and Alvarez agree that what is contemporary is "now" and though UPDC is continuously trying to distinguish its repertoire from modern dance,<sup>13</sup> this is just because unlike modern dance, contemporary dance refuses to have a codified set of movements and techniques; it is a dance genre that continuously evolves according to the needs and realities of both choreographers and dancers.

UPDC's choreographies remind one of the critic and dance scholar Amos Hetz's article (1994, 113) entitled "The Movement is still at the Beginning" where he points out that the first generation of dance revolution relentlessly worked on finding a language yet maintaining "a vital connection to simultaneous innovation"; that revolution had an understanding of previous dance forms even if these were continuously questioned.

Although Hetz refers to the first generation dance revolution, I believe that his observation may be used to describe how UPDC has built its vocabulary of movement without losing sight of its context as a dance company in a postcolonial nation. Some of the most distinguished works of the company, for example, are deconstructions of classical ballet such as Prokofiev's *Cinderella* turned into *Mariang Sinderela*, *ang Bagong Bayani*, Adam's *Giselle* into *Ang Higanti*, Igor Stravinsky's *Les Noces* and *Petrouchka* into *Ang Kasal* and *Pedro Kusinero*, respectively, and Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* into *Cracked Nut*.

A deconstruction of the ballet burlesque *Petrouchka* (music by Igor Stravinsky and performed in Paris, 13 July 1911 with Vaslav Nijinsky as *Petrouchka*), *Pedro Kusinero* (choreographed by Herbert Alvarez and Elena Laniog) places the classical piece within the Philippine's political realities at the time of UPDC's production.

The story is about a puppet with a human heart, a creature of straw which comes to life only to be disbelieved. In the history of the arts and literature, his

character has been incarnated in several texts as a funny man or clown (e.g., Charlie Chaplin) who nobody takes seriously. As his name indicates he is “the immortal and unhappy hero of every fair.” At the end of the story, however, he appears as a wiser man. The puppet in *Petrouchka* is contented with his being a puppet until he falls in love with a beautiful dancer and tries to win her heart. Against all odds, he does this but he fails and dies. But even if everyone laughs, he is triumphant in the end because he returns for the last laugh (Balanchine and Mason 1989, 305).

*Petrouchka*’s character is wittily incarnated as Pedro the cook in UPDC’s *Pedro Kusinero*. The production that was choreographed by Villaruz, though a deconstruction of the Russian ballet, retains the pathos in the story of the clown. Pedro is a *kusinero* in a nightclub frequented by military men of the Balikatan exercises. The first scene has five women entertainers (guest relations officers or GROs) who dream of marrying the foreign soldiers. Inflected by different accents, the women’s language reveal that they come from different provinces of the Philippines and were only driven by poverty to work at the bar. They also of how Pedro the *kusinero* irritates them as they keep on hearing the banging of his pots and pans in the background. When the women try on their high-heeled shoes, they mischievously exclaim: “Size 9... Ayyyyyyyy halog” (size 9... Oh, they’re big/loose). Sarcastic humor is further injected when Pedro mockingly remarks “This is futbol,” as he kicks the ball towards the direction of the Americans playing and when one of the women desperately running after a soldier screams “Doooglas here I go... ay here I come pala.” Thus, the UPDC’s treatment of *Petrouchka*, a serious attempt to deconstruct a ballet classic, manages to be humorous, even pregnant with sexual innuendos. This notwithstanding, the audience is kept apprehensive of the tragic ending that awaits Pedro the *kusinero*. The persona of the lanky and loser Pedro is projected in his frustrated attempt to dance with the women, an attempt which further turns off the woman he likes. Pedro’s movements are a stark contrast to the flamboyant, vigorous, and sexually-charged dances of the military men. The political implications of the dance cannot be lost on the audience—the playful movement of the female entertainers as they flirt with the military men, the authoritative figure of the bar manager, and Pedro’s persistent presence carry to completion his death. In his attempt to “save” the woman he likes from the Americans, he is killed by a soldier. The object of Pedro’s infatuation is admonished by the other women as they all look at his dying figure. The other entertainers blame her and exclaim: “Te,” an Ilonggo word that translates into “see!!!” It is the last scene, though, that serves as a strong punchline. Yes Pedro dies, his body is disposed of by the military men, but unlike *Petrouchka* whose angry ghost appears before the Charlatan and the people at

the fair, Pedro's returning presence is in the form of the familiar sound associated with him—the haunting clanging sound of his pots and pans. The curtain closes but the dancers remain upstage, one of them holding the cloth used by a soldier to strangle Pedro, and all of them hearing Pedro's pots and pans.

But lest things get too dramatic, the audience realizes that the banging sound resembles the Ifugao's gangsa dance/ritual beat. The final pose is consistent with the wit that characterizes the entire performance. What does one make of a scene where GROs move to the beating of gangsa? It could only be a humorous but scathing critique of the trajectory of the Philippine nation. Is Pedro the quintessential Pinoy, a loser in the face of the insidious influence of the United States? Not quite. Pedro dies in the end but he will always be hovering, a haunting "presence" among his people. There is more force in the fading sound of Pedro's pots than in the shaking fists of Petrouchka's ghost.

In *The Cracked Nut...Maria Clara's Colonial Dream* choreographed by Desiree Peralejo, Susie Noveno, and Princess Duma, the UPDC turns the classic Christmas story upside down.<sup>14</sup> The spirit of Christmas that has always been associated with the *Nutcracker* is absent in the *The Cracked Nut*. Though the production retains Tchaikovsky's music, there is nothing delightful in the Christmas Eve of the family in UPDC's version. It is a poor family with an alcoholic mother who verbally and physically abuses her child. On Christmas Eve, a group of *lavanderas* get together to celebrate but eventually end up fighting over a man who arrives in the scene. The Clara of *The Cracked Nut* (Maria Clara) is one of these women and the man is nothing like the godfather in the *Nutcracker*. The sinister man gives the young woman a toy soldier, which looks like a *katipunero*. Both the toy and the young woman confront two huge effigies of a can of sardines/*tuyo* (dried fish) and an "I Love Pinas" T-shirt. This scene captures the bittersweet relationship of a Filipino with his/her nation that does not have much to offer except sardines and tuyo; instead of the rats that Clara had to defend herself and the soldier against, Maria Clara had to confront an equally formidable Philippine reality.

The sinister man also entices the young woman with things (appearing onstage as huge effigies) associated with consumerism—gifts, a bottle of perfume, a washing machine, signature shirts, karaoke, TV, cigarette, and a pack of M&Ms. And instead of a room filled with toys delightfully coming alive, *The Cracked Nut* has the young woman and child in a *kariton*, moving around the stage as they watch sexually-charged dances performed by moving toys. *Cracked Nut* more or less retains the *Nutcracker's* various dances in the enchanted grotto / Enchanted Land of the

Sweets, but with a twist: all seem to be performances in a sleazy club/bar. The Spanish dancers' movements are sexier and sexual and do not exude the flair and arrogance of the Spanish dancers in *Nutcracker*. The Russian soldiers' dance is a fusion of break dance, ballet, tap dance, and hiphop, their vocabularies complementing each other in a choreography that bears the imprint of contemporary dance. The Arabian dancers are erotic dancers writhing on the floor, bodies sliding and lasciviously straddling each other. Some poses and the tensile quality of movement are even suggestive of positions in the *Kama Sutra*.

The audience is given quite a reprieve from this carnal scene when two men in Arabian costume join the women; they are supposed to be men mimicking the women but they also lift them as most men do in classical ballet. This injects slight humour to the otherwise long-drawn Arabian dance. Then appear the Reedflute/Candycane dancers who are girls in baby's wear, each having a milk bottle in her mouth. One immediately notices that these are not innocent girl-child/ren as their bawdy movements suggest sexual experience. This is reinforced by how they dance with the two men who enter the stage. *Nutcracker's* Reedflute dancers are Lolitas, or even prostituted children in UPDC's *The Cracked Nut*. In the supposedly lyrical "Waltz of the Flowers," the audience is greeted by bargirls in shorts and bras, gyrating and moving like striptease dancers as the macho dancers who later join them do the same.

Finally, the grand *pas de deux* is a dance of sexual assault. In this perhaps most "classical" choreography in the production, the young woman on pointes dances with a towering figure in briefs and a huge letter "S" on his chest. He is Superman, a figure alluding to the super power of the United States... until he sexually assaults the young woman in a dance of molestation and physical abuse, leaving her unconscious.

Just as the audience is about to conclude that there is nothing festive and delightful in *The Cracked Nut*, the small girl enters and tries to revive the unconscious young woman. The girl asks help from *Inang Bayan* who appears in her Filipiniana *terno* and cradles and brings back to life the young woman. To the music of "Ang Pasko ay Sumapit," the two women perform a dance of renewal characterized by upward movements and leaps. If the political implication is not yet clear to the audience, the final scene says it all. All the dancers enter in common street clothes and join the *finale*, led by the young woman and *Inang Bayan*. The dance ends triumphantly, and dramatically, with the child running around carrying the Philippine flag and the dancers striking a pose in a diagonal line with the young

woman in front, standing on the shoulders of a man. She points to the horizon before her, a gesture of faith in a brighter future.

Hence, the childlike hope of Christmas in *Nutcracker* is transformed into a bigger dream in *Cracked Nut*. It becomes the hope of the nation. The Philippine nation may be a “cracked nut,” an injured nation suffering from corruption, exploitation, and consumerism, but the familiar figure of the Inang Bayan comes to fore as one of deliverance and salvation.

It is the same Inang bayan, incarnated in four women, that appears in *Feminina Ang Bagong Babae* (2007). In flowing dresses whose colors bear semblance to those of the Philippine flag, they dance to a music that sounds like a soundtrack of some war movie. The Inang Bayan is not quite feminine; her powerful jumps and quick recoveries form floor combinations that have been distinguishing movements of contemporary dance, evoke a kind of strength not quite associated with either the nation or the Filipino woman. Hers is a physical strength complemented by grace. When the music shifts to a more poignant melody, Inang Bayan’s nurturing quality is revealed and eloquent gestures highlight her triumph. With evocative lighting that complements not just the music but the movements as well, the short piece climaxes with the women dancing to a more majestic and march-like music. They end in a dramatic pose with heads looking up, an indication of strength, not just of the Philippine women but of the nation as well. The “bagong babae” dances to a different historical tune and moves in a contemporary way; stripped of the more predictable vocabulary of classical ballet, the movements are characterized by physicality complemented by elegance. She is the Feminina.

*Pedro Kusinero* and *The Cracked Nut* are examples of two full-length “deconstruction pieces” where UPDC’s dancers had to articulate their critical readings of these canonical dance pieces, transform them into postcolonial creations and complement them with their knowledge of the visual and aural aspects of staging. Productions like these are the results of the dancers’ academic training (e.g., required composition classes) and “practicum” credited as their apprenticeship. The variety of choreographies of the UPDC show how the company has steered its dancers towards an aesthetics, whether this be classical (i.e., in the earlier productions), modern, or contemporary (i.e., in the past decade), that values knowledge of the field, discipline and rigor.

Lawengko-Baguilat stresses the role of composition classes in providing dancers with the parameters of specific dance forms. And although the philosophy

of contemporary dance allows for individual expression of movement, this does not mean that anything goes in this dance form. Alvarez, an avowed formalist, is adamant in saying that the choreographer has the responsibility to put his message across, regardless of the style he adheres to. Clarity of vision and intention is crucial in any piece; even if dance is not always “storytelling” and thus easily comprehensible to the audience, it should always have sense, significance, and impact. Notwithstanding UPDC’s respect for artistic freedom, Alvarez notes that the company is part of the State University and cannot therefore have a nonchalant attitude towards their productions. Choreographers cannot simply say “I don’t care whether the audience understands my work.”

Such stance may seem constraining to the creativity of the dancers and outdated in the twenty-first century that celebrates depthlessness and the multiplicity of meanings. One, however, sees the importance of Alvarez’s take on clarity of vision in every dance. In literature, as in dance, multiplicity of meanings does not mean vagueness of meanings, or even absence of meaning. A contemporary dance choreography, for example, may discourse on the absence of meaning but it cannot not have “meaning” at all. The latter is irresponsible art.

Both UPDC’s artistic directors believe that movement and concept are crucial and that dancers and choreographers must know the forms and rules of particular dances before they violate them. As deconstruction presupposes a deep understanding of canonical pieces, a choreographer must be familiar with the classics to appreciate the contemporary or even the postmodern.

Given the environment of UPDC and the training of the company’s dancers, both before and during their undergraduate years at the university, their works have been varied in terms of subject matter and movement vocabulary. This notwithstanding, a number of pieces in their repertoire are informed by an awareness of Philippine socio-political and cultural realities. And although Filipinization is not a thrust of the company, most of the choreographies embody contemporary issues, both in terms of politics and aesthetics. The three contemporary choreographies analyzed above, for example, intelligently combine movements from various dance genres—folk, ballet, modern, and even hip-hop. Lawengko-Baguilat’s comment on the use of spoken language as a choreographic device in a number of UPDC’s productions is interesting. She explains that although the device is not new as it had been used by modern dancers in New York, UPDC’s use of multi-lingual phrases in their works is also an indication of the various backgrounds of the dancers. What could be a mere choreographic device for choreographers in the United States takes



on a different cultural significance when used by UPDC. It is thus no coincidence that in the more recent productions of the UPDC, there is almost always the use of Bisayan phrases, as quite a number of the company's dancers come from that region.

Lawengko-Baguilat likewise notes that the cultural diversity of the Philippines complements the nature of contemporary dance. Because the latter draws its strength from a philosophy that values a combination of movements from different dances as it continuously evolves its own vocabulary, the Philippines' diverse cultures is a rich source for contemporary dance. As a dance form that is very conceptual, contemporary dance may draw on the nation's cultural heritage for ideas that could be developed into dance choreographies.

Given the liberal aesthetics of contemporary dance, it is easy to get sloppy in one's choreography. Without rigor and a clear discourse on dance, a choreographer could carelessly combine movements and simply call anything, even the absence of movement, "contemporary dance." And this is why Alvarez insists that although contemporary dance is not exclusive to the trained body and is thus very democratic, everything begins in the classroom. This insistence accounts for the well-framed pieces of UPDC. The full-length deconstruction pieces are examples of how contemporary dance has enabled choreographers to discreetly and intelligently meld narratives of the nation into dance. It is also worth noting how UPDC injects humor in their productions which would otherwise be dark, even depressing narratives of the nation. With a deep understanding of the Pinoy sensibility, the choreographers know that the Filipinos more often than not face national adversaries with a peculiar sense of humor. This too has to be tastefully embedded in the dance pieces as the full-length productions of the UPDC successfully do. Notwithstanding the serious political and social issues that are at the core of these productions, most of them are characterized by a slight comic quality.

### **Not Just Aerials: Airdance's "Dancing the Middle"**

Established in 2001 by dancers who were former members of other dance companies, Airdance boasts of a team of dancers with various backgrounds—modern, jazz, hip-hop, breakdance, classical ballet, and even martial arts. Its members are choreographers, professional dancers, and dance teachers; some of them have joined institutions such as its former Artistic Director, Paul Morales, who is now the

Artistic Director of Ballet Philippines. Inspired by dance companies abroad such as the Pilobolus Dance Theatre in the United States, Airdance has always wanted to avoid the rigid structure of a traditional dance company that is most often, if not always, headed by an Artistic Director.

Avel Baustista, Airdance's manager, recounts that when their group (i.e., with Paul Morales, Dwight Rodrigazo, and Lynley Teng) agreed to form Airdance, they researched on the possible structure for the company, one which is not hierarchical in nature. They wanted a more democratic system to complement the varied backgrounds of the dancers and choreographers. Thus, despite having an Artistic Director, Airdance maintains its non-hierarchical structure by allowing the choreographers to draw from their strengths in creating their pieces. Their shows evolve from the collective decision of its members who, according to Ava Villanueva, Airdance's current artistic director, either work within a given theme for a show, or freely create pieces based on how they feel.

The sense of freedom that the company values since its days at the Outlet Yard (i.e., its first studio location) and now at the Dance Forum Space of Myra Beltran, is embedded in the philosophy of "contemporary" which is how Airdance describes its dances. Bautista reminisces that back in 2001, they just wanted to explore new ideas and to create a space for the exploration of movements. This is what the audience sees in the productions of Airdance; for Bautista, this is the essence of "contemporary"—a fusion of styles, a recognition of the fluidity of techniques, and a medium to express a story or a thought. Villanueva explains that they respect the varied dance backgrounds of the dancers and have never policed each other in terms of choreography and style. No one has dared say that a work is not "contemporary" enough. And neither has anyone categorically defined what contemporary means. For her, "what is contemporary is cultural—what is contemporary for the Thais might be the combination of the classical and the modern but what is contemporary for the Filipinos will be different because of their exposure to European choreographies."

This uncertainty or even refusal to pin down a dance form could pose a problem in terms of discoursing on contemporary dance's aesthetics, philosophy, elements, and techniques. Contemporary choreographers themselves have even complained about the misuse of the term to label any form of dance that presents itself as a *mélange* of styles. An awareness of this danger, however, could also have possible consequences as choreographers and dancers have become more conscious of their discourse lest they create works that are simply a mish-mash of movement

vocabularies. With this in mind, Airdance has produced a number of works that have articulated the sense of contemporary dance woven into contemporary national issues.

For its first concert, Airdance staged *Indios Bravos*, a politically-charged choice which traces its historical significance to the late nineteenth century when Jose Rizal recuperated the much degraded label “indio” and made it a source of “pride and ethnic unity asserting a Philippine ethnicity at a time when *Filipino* was still appropriated by the colonial masters.” Rizal’s formation of Los Indios Bravos was a crucial moment in the development of Philippine nationalism (Delmendo 2005, 27).<sup>15</sup>

The highly-acclaimed full-length dance theatre based on the libretto of playwright/poet Nicolas Pichay, was first performed on a historical date, 26 February 2004, in a historical place, Teatro Aguinaldo, Camp Aguinaldo. Whether or not this was a deliberate choice would be interesting to pursue as the confluence of dates provides a significant connection between the past and the present, a crucial point raised in *Indios Bravos*. The production is an insightful exploration of what ties the Filipino of the twenty-first century to the Ilustrados of the nineteenth century—their travels abroad and their experiences as Filipinos in foreign lands. The moving original scores of Bob Aves, Grace Nono, and Julius Mocorro heighten the historical magnitude of the dances, particularly when the character of the young Rizal (Pepe) reads a letter he sent to del Pilar just before he left Spain. The two were among the *propagandistas* who spent their prime years in Europe; Del Pilar lived in Spain from 1888 to 1896, where he died of tuberculosis and Rizal traveled around Europe—Belgium, France, England, Germany, and Spain—for a total of eight years (Reyes 2009, xxvi). Rizal’s letter expresses his feelings and opinions on the fate of the Filipinos in Madrid, the implications of the Philippine exposition in Madrid, and the formation of Indios Bravos, a group of young Ilustrados in Madrid. As Rizal and the Indios Bravos assert their identity, Maria, an overseas contract worker of the twenty-first century finds herself as one of the thousand workers abroad, trying to earn for their families back in the Philippines. In a dramatic tableaux, Filipinos from different centuries meet—metaphorically—in one historical plane, brought together by a common fate—the displacement from their nation as they pursue either national or individual interests. Such destiny is constantly reiterated by the movement motif in the choreography, specifically in the emotionally powerful repetition of huge strides, of legs emphatically moving forward. The effect, to a certain extent, is hypnotic. Rendered in variations, the dancers keep on walking, carrying canes (i.e., Ilustrados) or suitcases (i.e., the Overseas Filipino Workers or

OFWs). Maria may not have Rizal's grand vision but she does carry the Philippine nation on her shoulders—it is her remittance and those of the thousands of OFWs that keep the Philippine economy afloat. Both are heroes in their own ways. This recognition is depicted in the final scene where Rizal and Maria, holding on to each other, are suspended gracefully from a rope, a pose indicating their intertwined lives. Ultimately, what the viewer sees in *Indios Bravos* is a nation on the move, a nation whose citizens are destined to look for better lives in other nations. Not quite an inspiring view of our destiny, one might say. But this disheartening prospect is negated by Pepe's and Maria's final pose and by the way the earlier dark and ominous music culminates in a majestic note. Thus, notwithstanding this exodus of Filipinos throughout history, they will always find dignity in what they do, wherever they are. They will always be *Indios Bravos*.

In several instances, Airdance performed history not just when it premiered on a very historical date. As the piece that Airdance featured as a member of the delegation to the World Exposition 2005 in Nagoya Japan, from 26 March to 1 April 2005, *Indios Bravos* once again participated in making history, in performing a reading of history through contemporary dance. One cannot miss the irony that Airdance asserted its reading of history as part of the Department of Tourism's project to showcase the culture of the Philippines in dance and music, both traditional and contemporary.<sup>16</sup> One is reminded of the 1908 Saint Louis Exposition when Filipinos from the Mountain Province were exoticised when they were made to perform their “native” identities in the United States. In 2005, however, Airdance took the challenge of performing the various strands that comprised the nation's history and identity. With a vision of history that presented a remarkable tapestry of human suffering and triumph, *Indios Bravos* reclaimed a space for the Philippine nation.

The moving power of *Indios Bravos* was already felt in the country the year before the Nagoya Exposition when excerpts of Dwight Rodrigazo's choreography, as directed by Paul Morales, won for Airdance the “Best Young Contemporary Dance Theater Company of the Philippines” award in the third Mindanao Modern Dance Competition on 17 June 2004, in Koronadal, South Cotabato City. The competition was part of the Tnalak festival organized by the Provincial Government of South Cotabato in cooperation with the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA). Once again, *Indios Bravos's* sense of history made connections in South Cotabato, among various dance companies all over the country.<sup>17</sup> For a seemingly rudderless nation, *Indios Bravos* served as a tapestry that wove several historical threads together. It was a choreography that enabled Filipinos—at the very least, dance communities—from different regions to connect.

In 2006, Airdance mounted *Body Politics Season*, a series of shows focusing on “thinking” and feeling bodies and on bodies as sites of contestations for power. Among the three shows that were part of the series (the three others being *Malakas@Maganda* which problematized notions of strength and beauty, *Carmen de la Cruz*, a Philippine version of Georges Bizet’s *Carmen*, re-set in 1970s Manila, and *Deus ex Machina*), it is *Vital Statistics* that gives us the strongest pulse of the Philippine nation, of what ails the country, whether these be local or international problems. Performed at the Studio Space (a very intimate venue that contributed to the sensorial experience of the audience), *Vital Statistics* comprised of short works which address issues on youth, women, sexuality, gender equality, poverty, and violence. These are not really new, considering that we face a daily dose of problems like these. The title “Vital Statistics” itself also seems to downplay the magnitude of these concerns which are given to the audience in terms of numbers. Yet the short pieces, choreographed by Processo Gelladuga II, Reagan Cornelio, Avel Bautista, Christine Maranan-Novales, Elena Laniog, Vinia Pamplona, Nina Hayuma Habulan, and Ernest Mandap refute the seeming banality of these realities.

The first piece, “Bullicide: Death at Game and Time” (choreography, Gelladuga; music, Coco Rosi and Wim Maerten), opens with two schoolboys playing. A schoolgirl joins in their game and the three appear to enjoy romping around. Disturbing, however, are the playful movements characterized by motions of violence—even the most innocent gesture has tinges of cruelty. And the nature of this play becomes clearer when the girl’s body moves in anguish as one of the boys abuse her, the rough lifts indicating not just the boys’ rowdy behavior but in fact, sexual abuse. The crescendo in music complements the girl’s scream as she eventually hangs herself. The impact of the choreography lies in the subtlety of the violence, in the texture of the movements which is simultaneously fluid and rough. Even the death of the girl is rendered more dramatic because it is her waist—and not her head—that hangs from a rope. The vital stats projected on video at the beginning of the piece calls attention to a long-ignored problem: bullying. “Over 19,000 attempt to commit suicide everyday, 1 every half an hour.” “Bullicide” is a troubling but sensitive treatment of the problem.

Another malady that has become a major social concern is the aimlessness of the youth all over the world. This should not be an unfamiliar issue among Filipinos as our very own national hero discoursed on the role of the youth in nation building. “Teenage Wasteland” (choreography by Avel Bautista; music, “Sparks” by The Who, “Stuck in a Moment” by U2, and “Baba O’Riley” by The

Who) renders this often-ignored reality. The dancers' vigorous jumps and lifts and the constant running back and forth and all around the performance area convey the visual and kinesthetic experience of being lost and directionless. Energy is pumping in the bodies of the young dancers in white shirts and jeans, all looking the same, all searching for direction. The recurring bobbing of heads to the upbeat music of The Who drives home the cliché "Youth is wasted on the young" (George Bernard Shaw's famous line follows the title of the piece in the show's Program). The choreography is a new take on the simple truth regarding the young and U2's "Stuck in a Moment" so aptly highlights that impasse characterizing their lives. The slow and weightier floor movements, the dancers dragging one another, and a female dancer carrying another dancer upside down bespeak of an anxiety commonly afflicting the youth: the absence of plans for the future and prolonged uncertainty. The second song by The Who is upbeat and the dancers appear reinvigorated, once again leaping, running towards all directions, and finally converging. For the final pose, everyone stands erect with arms outstretched towards the sky. They are the youth perpetually in search for something. Indeed, there has been a wasteful expenditure of energy and what we have is still a wasteland. A teenage wasteland.

It is not only "national and global" issues which *Vital Stats* critiques. The wittily choreographed "Victoria's Secret" (by Nina Hayuma; music by Vivaldi) reveals what most women repress: their sexuality. The piece opens with a woman sitting on a high stool, surrounded by four women. She sings Kuh Ledesma's "Bulaklak" obviously alluding to a woman, her femininity, her virginity. The woman singing is pensive and looking out into space. Her body crouched, legs intertwined, and her feet, somehow twisting. As her fingers caress her lips, she writhes and shakes her legs. This she does, as the other women lie prostrate on the floor, their bodies fluidly moving, their pelvis gyrating, and their legs extending towards the ceiling. And as the music of Vivaldi heightens the sexuality of the entire piece, they caress their legs, charging their bodies with energy because they enjoy feeling themselves, because they relish the pleasure of simply being touched. The feverish woman on the stool stands up, runs around, chases the women, taps and stops them from whatever they are doing. She is Victoria who refuses to reveal her innermost secret. She is Victoria who requires of other women the same vow of silence, a vow of secrecy. But she fails. As Vivaldi's music crescendos, so does she, her body as well as those of the other women quiver and tremble in ecstasy.

To the question "How is women's sexuality of national import?" the reply is: "And why not?" Women's bodies have always been part of discourses on the nation; symbolic of nations, these bodies are to be defended against enemies

in times of war. These bodies, though cathected to the nation, have always been denied a sexuality. Ironically, the success of the multi-million lingerie business called “Victoria’s Secret” precisely capitalizes on such repression of sexuality—the thrill in buying the lingerie lies in purchasing a “secret.” Despite the advances in feminism around the world, female sexuality remains a delicate issue, particularly in the Philippines where women are expected to repress their physical needs and desires. In our nation, Victoria’s secret will perhaps remain a secret, only to be expressed in contemporary choreographies such as “Victoria’s Secret.”

But just as women’s sexuality is generally refused recognition in most societies, it is this same sexuality that sometimes gives them unfair advantage over men. “Stylish Girl” (choreography by Jethrow Paquinto; music by Dimitri) which follows “Victoria’s Secret” is an intelligent rejoinder to the previous piece. It opens with: “For every ten beautiful women, there are three women who can also do the job.” The lights brighten and the audience sees three good-looking, well-built men dressed as women. Their attire, however, is a camp version of women’s dresses—shiny lavender balloon skirts that look like bloomers and absurd looking huge ribbons tied around their necks. As their attires are farcical, so are their movements—these are three men dancing, gyrating showing their legs, and mimicking women’s graceful movements. These are all attempts to ape how women conduct themselves in order to get what they want, jobs in particular. Ultimately, “Stylish Girl” foregrounds the issue of gender equality, from a male point of view. It reverses the popular feminist adage “If men can do it, so can we” by dancing the dictum “If women can do it, so can we.”

“Civilians reported killed by military intervention in Iraq, 43,927,000. 2.2. million is the number of refugees and people displaced in Darfur. 2,097,705, is the number of battle deaths in Vietnam and countless orphans and widows.” These are the figures that form the background of “Habibi” (choreography by Ernest Mandap) which renders the savagery of war in a contemporary *pas de deux*. The distinctly Arabian music which plays as an ominous background to the dance of anguish also sets the context, the Middle East. What the audience sees unfolding, however, is not a staging of war, but a painful consequence of war—the pain of losing someone. The piece is one of imploration, a woman beseeching a man to stay. Her graceful motions and soulful partnering with the man articulate the sorrow of impending separation; the man tries to be gentle to the woman who runs to him and clings onto his body. In this prolonged anguish, the woman takes the man’s overcoat and wears it herself; and perhaps as declaration of her selfless love for him, she will take his place. There is no reprieve from protracted

grief as the woman continuously dances with the man, convincing him to sit on a chair, to stay. But just as the audience feels that the man will finally remain in the arms of his lover, he stands up, almost in a daze, leaves his overcoat, walks away, and exits the direction of the audience, head held up high, as if ready to confront his fate. It is probably death that awaits him with the music and gunshots in the background confirming such inevitability. Aptly titled “Habibi” which is an Arabic word for my beloved (*habib* refers to beloved of a male; the female form is *habibti* or *habibati*), the piece is a poignant reframing of war, dealing with the subject matter by rendering its antithesis—love. It is love that is tested by the tormenting effects of war’s violence and deaths.

Considering the violence, war, hatred, and gender inequality that plague the nation, most Filipinos find themselves lifting up everything to their Creator. “Kyrie” (choreography by Paul Morales and the cast of Airdance; music from “Missa Mysterium” by Francisco Feliciano; Filipino poem/text by Rolando Tinio), the title of the final piece in *Vital Statistics*, is a Greek word for “O Lord,” also used to mean “Lord have Mercy”). Barely recovering from the passionate but painful rendering of the war in “Habibi,” the audience is once again presented with another emotionally moving piece on the state of the Philippine nation. The piece opens with dancers lighting candles and wiping the floor (acts alluding to the plight of many Filipinos exported as labor) followed by the projection of appalling statistics on the screen:

The Philippines was second only to Iraq in the number of journalists killed last year.

Since 2001, forty-three journalists have been killed in the Philippines, more than those killed under the fourteen-year Marcos dictatorship according to the NUJP. From 2002 June this year, the Commission on Human Rights has investigated eighty-six cases of alleged killings against 119 activists and leaders of various peasant, labor, and other mass-based groups.

In 2006, when Filipinos were asked: Is your income enough for the needs of your family, 60% answered “Not enough.”

Less than 30% of Filipinos control over 85% of the national wealth.

More than half of all Filipinos live beneath the poverty line.

Kyrie... Kyrie Eleison



A heartrending scene appears before the audience—in a swaying and rocking movement, a man carries a woman while another man carries a man, each of them a burden onto the other, but nonetheless, willing to take on the weight. As Rolando Tinio’s poem is heard, and the grave music plays, the dancers open their arms to the sides, thrust forward their chests as if their bodies have been crucified. The choreography is a sustained counterpoint of bodies gradually dying and of bodies trying to revive each other. A man in all white—a figure resembling that of Jesus / a savior / a martyr—dramatically enters carrying a languished body in brown clothes. In a very eloquent but helpless effort, the languishing body moves to stand on the shoulders of his savior. For a breathless moment, both of them stand but just as hope and redemption seem to be the culminating point of this piece, the man in brown ends up suspended from a cloth hanging upside down. He himself is crucified.

*Kyrie... Kyrie Elleison.* Lord have mercy on us. What will be the fate of a nation whose people are abandoned by their Creator, their very own savior? Notwithstanding the piece’s dismal ending, there is room for a more reassuring future. Taking the biblical roots of the prayer into consideration,<sup>18</sup> one could still read the choreography as one of hope—that despite the death of his saviour, the Filipino faith must remain strong. *Kyrie Elleison* is not only a petition but an acknowledgment of a higher being’s continuous kindness.

The production has been well curated—most of the vital stats are not only those of the Philippine nation but those of other nations as well. The pieces comprising the entire show build onto each other, intensifying (neither exaggerating nor belaboring the point) the immensity of global problems but eventually presenting a sliver of hope in the last piece, “*Kyrie*.” Amidst bleak national realities, there is comfort in faith.

Airdance has discreetly used the freedom to create and push the limits of dance. The number of cross-overs in *Indios Bravos* and *Vital Statistics* subtly knit into each other because of the clear concept holding each production and the execution of movements with mastery. The cross-overs are seen in terms of movement, music, and concepts. What perhaps prevents these fusions from being self-indulgent is the idea of dance shared by most of Airdance’s members. Bautista explains that though their members are free to explore their ideas, their choreographies tend to have a “message,” whether or not they have been consciously created to be so. He stresses that choreographers cannot just go “POMO” without fully understanding the paradigm of postmodernism, its assumptions and forms

of articulation. Villanueva on the other hand, admits her great appreciation for the clean lines or “linya” characterizing classical ballet. Despite having moved on to contemporary dance, she has never let go of her ballet training and insists that contemporary dance is also a disciplined form of dance, a style or a medium which is “aral.” Hence, despite the popularity of postmodernism and its celebration of depthlessness which could very well complement Airdance’s philosophy, the company has produced thought-provoking pieces characterized by a melding of styles and techniques held tightly by a clear framework.

It is not only the individual pieces of Airdance that embody the aesthetics of contemporary dance and the numerous narratives of the nation. As a company, its practices are responses to contemporary national conditions. Its summer workshops, commercial endeavors such as corporate productions, musical events, fashion shows, concerts, product launches do not only financially sustain the dancers but more importantly enable them to continue pursuing their passion and craft. Their productions such as *Indios Bravos*, *Vital Statistics*, *R18*, and *Past Tenses* were not “earners,” but artistic shows, as Bautista refers to them. They were made possible by earnings from the more commercial projects of the company. And because of this need to keep the company financially viable, the dancers are encouraged, if not required to learn different kinds of dances to be cast in commercial productions.

Given the practical concerns faced by the company, the members of Airdance have to continuously train in the different dance/movement techniques and at the same time adopt a more flexible paradigm and vision of dance as a response to more basic needs. They have managed to shift from one paradigm to another and to look at dance from different angles, whether this be performed for commercial or artistic purposes. Bautista calls this perpetual balancing between practical needs and passion for dance, “dancing the middle.” Jokingly, he says that this schizophrenic condition is a challenging one; as dancers meet the demands of their commercial endeavors, they simultaneously have to make sure that artistic integrity is not compromised.

Such versatility is much needed in a postcolonial nation where dance, unless it is transformed into spectacle or performed by actors and actresses, is hardly appreciated. Even the choice of site where performances are held (e.g., small studios and in the empty shops at the Outlet Yard) is perhaps not just a matter of “contemporary” aesthetics.<sup>19</sup> It is for sure also a matter of economics and politics<sup>20</sup>—an issue of financial constraints and accessibility to venues. Confronted with all

kinds of limitations including the availability of received or accepted sites for art which are usually run by bureaucrats, independent artists in the Philippines have no choice but experiment with the possibilities of alternative spaces.

Thus, Airdance is more than what some people know or think it to be, a dance company that performs aerals. As Bautista points out, the company's name could very well describe its "malleability;" like air, it is able to take the shape of its container.

### Dance Forum's Encounters with Space, Time, and History

Established by Myra Beltran in 1995, Dance Forum has provided the space for numerous artists such as Paul Morales, Christine Maranan, Enrico Labayan, Dwight Rodrigazo, Jojo Lucila, and Denisa Reyes. Dance Forum has at the same time produced collaborative works with visual artists, musicians, film makers, and theatre companies such as Alfonso and Ramon Bolipata, Carlitos Siguion-Reyna, Benedicto Cabrera, Robert Feleo, Ramon Santos, Anton Juan, Karen Flores, Dulaang UP and the University of Iowa Theatre Arts Department .

In the twenty years of independent creation, Beltran has established affiliations with Ballet Oldenburg (Germany), Ballet of Prishtina (Yugoslavia), Ballet Philippines, and The Lab. Projekt-Philippines. And for more than a decade of sheer determination, the company has managed to contribute to the discourse of contemporary dance in the Philippines by asserting its presence in dance festivals both here and abroad— the WDA Festival in Dusseldorf, Germany (2002), the Exposition Of Contemporary Dance Fiesta in Singapore (2003), the Pundaquit Arts Festival (almost yearly since 1995) in Zambales, and the Baguio International Arts Festival.

With the range of its collaborative work, and the vision of its director, Dance Forum's productions have been inspired by literary texts, re-readings of history, pieces on women, and discourses on the nature of dance itself.

While the works of the other companies discussed above place the body within the path of history, thereby allowing us a glimpse of a part of dance history and choreographic readings of various narratives that constitute the history of the Philippine nation, it is Beltran's *Itim Asu 1719-2009* that explores the intricacies of history and historiography. Based on the play of Virginia Moreno's *Onyx Wolf/Itim*

*Asu*, the multi-media production of Dance Forum adds another layer to the already complicated structure of Moreno's play within a play which is comprised of several narratives such as Fr. Jose Burgos's *La Loba Negra*, Jose Rizal's *El Filibusterismo*, and the various writings of friars during the Spanish colonial era. The historical present of the play, 1906, is set in Teatro Zorilla, Quiapo where a performing group is rehearsing a play commissioned by the American government in celebration of the naming of two streets after Raja Lacandola and Rajah Sulaiman. The audience thus watches a play in which another play is being rehearsed. But even before the historical present of *Onyx Woman*, there is a scene, the Prologue, set in the Royal Fiscal Court in Intramuros in 1719. A peasant enters with a little boy who is supposed to be registered as the descendant of Sulaiman. This is in response to the circular issued by Governor Bustamante requiring the descendants of Sulaiman and Lacandola to register with the Fiscal Court for purposes of tax exemption. While the other man claims to be the heir of Lacandola, the little boy only has the testimony of the friar who baptized him.<sup>21</sup>

Moreno's production covers the year 1719 and embeds a couple of characters from *El Filibusterismo* and *La Loba Negra*. The lead actress, La Tondeña is the wife of Jose Corazon de Jesus or Huseng Batute, the director of the play *Onyx Wolf*. Their son, who plays the roles of Simoun and Sulaiman, is actually just using his theatre activities as a cover up for his involvement in the *Insurrecto* movement. It is through the play's dramaturge, Don Panyong, that the audience learns about the conspiracy and murder of Governor Bustamante in 1719. The following scenes rehearsed also reveal how the wife of Bustamante also known as *La Loba Negra* (Itim *Asu*) became a fugitive and supporter of the *insurrectos* after the death of her husband. She kills the friar responsible for the murder of her husband but she is shot and eventually dies. In her last moments, however, she marries her daughter off to the descendent of Sulaiman who is actually the young boy who appears in the Prologue of the play. Sandugo, their son, is thus a direct descendant of Itim *Asu*.

The plot thickens when the audience realizes that Batute's son does not only play the role of Sandugo in the play being rehearsed. He is also Elias in Rizal's novels and the famous Makario Sakay, leader of the *insurrectos* who fought the Americans. When the play is finally performed, and the audience watches the popular scene in *El Fili* where a bomb is supposed to explode on Paulita's wedding day, confusion happens when the bomb on stage is thought to be a real bomb. Batute's son is accidentally killed amidst the chaos and the play that is supposed to celebrate the naming of streets ends as a funeral procession. In an interview

with Moreno, the playwright explains that she had wanted the funeral to “show ‘our heroes’ dead so that ‘you’ may live, and where hate, love, black, white are all, one” (Beltran 2008, 195).

If Moreno’s play juxtaposes *La Loba Negra* and *El Fili* by using Huseng Batute as the narrator-playwright/author, Beltran’s *Itim Asu* adds more narratives to the already multi-layered historical play of Moreno, thus producing what critic Marten Spanberg calls “stereoscopic effect” (1994, 95).<sup>22</sup> Beltran’s production opens with a video screen with shots taking the audience to old streets and historical places (possibly in Manila). The shots that snake through these streets, the ink blotches that appear on the screen, and the grave music arranged by sound designer Teresa Barrozo, set the mood of the dance drama. Both video and music are complemented by the dancers’ movements which provide the audience with a sensorial feel of moving through history.

As the performance unfolds, one realizes that Moreno’s Elias/Sakay/Sandugo takes on another character in Beltran’s work. He is also Benigno Aquino, Jr., the choreography intelligently weaving a scene of his assassination into the bigger narrative of Moreno’s play. The serene and seemingly meditative movements complemented by the often haunting music heighten the somber mood characterizing Beltran’s choreographic reading of history. This figure who passes through the aisle in between the long benches where the audience are seated and then walks towards the performance area, is likewise walking us through history. We move with him—from the eighteenth century, to the nineteenth, to the twentieth, and finally to the twenty-first century, Beltran’s historical present.

Yet this walk through history is not a linear one. The hyper kinetic movements of the dancers—their cartwheels and pinwheels, whirling arms,<sup>23</sup> and writhing bodies on the floor—which slow down with the despondent pas de deux of *La Loba Negra* and *Bustamante* render the energy informing historiography, a making of history that draws from multiple sources all at the same time.

Beltran’s production could be placed in the “tradition” of texts reconstructing a historical event in our nation’s narrative, or should I say, narratives. It continues not just Moreno’s re-telling of the life of Bustamante’s wife but also of Burgos’s controversial alleged account of *La Loba Negra*.<sup>24</sup> As some parts of Beltran’s choreography are lyrically articulated by the tensile quality of the dancers’ movement,<sup>25</sup> the audience sees and feels the love and anguish in the lives of historical figures, whether fictional or real. Having immersed herself in texts on performance

studies and historiography and looking back at her decades of creating works, Beltran comes up with a clear choreographic intent for the production:

We are using contemporary dance, video and sound design, without spoken dialogue. This visual world is my translation of this drama's point of view of history. There are layers of forgetfulness or layers of untruth in our history. I am interested in how this drama shows the level of complexity with which we, as Filipinos, create meaning in history, how we readily blur fiction and reality, myth and history. (Lanuza 2011, n.p.)

When the intensity of the movements increases, the audience feels the burden of history—its making, its formation, and its progression. The dissonant images on the video and on the performance area, combined with read passages from the *El Fili* and the 1942 address of Colonel Wainright, assault the audience. All these constitute Beltran's reading not just of Moreno's *Itim Asu*, but also of our nation's present and future. It is a history that is more than palimpsestic. Rendered as a multi-media production, Beltran's *Itim Asu* reads Philippine history as a polyphonous text similar to a musical piece having two or more independent melodic parts played simultaneously.

This polyphonic effect is also produced in *Payatas: Point Counterpoint*, a dance-video collaboration of Beltran and director Carlitos Siguion-Reyna who also worked closely with Nonoy Froilan. The work's stereoscopic effect is successfully carried out precisely by the production's concept: counterpoint. The principle of combining two or more melodic lines into a meaningful whole is applied also to media (i.e., film/video) and choreography.

In the actual live performance of *Payatas: Point Counterpoint*, the video is projected onto the screen behind the performance area. The video and the live performance, run simultaneously, both providing narratives that fortify the "theme" of the production. Siguion-Reyna creates a special video presentation by placing the video vis-à-vis the live performance which in turn has the same video projected behind the performance area. Thus, what the video gives us is a split screen, or two screens, showing the live performance on the left screen and the video on the right screen. The layers of live and recorded dance as presented in the video format achieve a rich texture for the narrative.

The dance-video collaboration further illustrates Beltran's notion of history and historiography. The video opens with two screens, one showing the

live performance and the other, a child looking far into the distance, as if waiting for someone. Shot in Botolan, Zambales, in an open area covered by lahar, the first video already evokes a sense of inevitable doom. After a few seconds, the figure of a troubled woman emerges from the distance; the shot has her seemingly walking towards the young boy but the two do not meet. Instead, the exhausted woman lies in a fetus-like position beside a driftwood.

In the performance area, five dancers in black—two men and three women—are on the floor, curled in a similar fetus-like position. They slowly roll on their sides, gradually crawl, and dance to a fugue. On screen, the shot of the woman lying on the lahar sand is followed by moving shots of Payatas, a garbage dump in Quezon City. Tall buildings are seen towering behind the dump while children walk past the cranes positioned amidst squalor. A woman whom we could assume to be the mother of one of the children, walks with them. The two male dancers on stage pass onto each other a woman whose body eventually becomes exhausted. The movement motif, that of a woman falling onto the arms of men, is present in both the live choreography and the video. As the music intensifies and the floor movements of drop and recovery become heavier and grave, the video shows the woman being physically and verbally abused by her husband. Their son, the same boy shown at the beginning of the video, watches everything happen; he witnesses how his mother, pushed to her limits, stabs his father. And he feels how his mother shields him from the members of the media who, upon learning of the incident, immediately rush into the scene and sensationalize the story.

In the next scene, both video and choreography capture the pain and sorrow of the woman. The video shows the woman sitting on a box inside a prison cell whose faint light comes from a small window. Providing the counterpoint to the video is the live performance where male dancers carry the seemingly lifeless bodies of the female dancers; two women console each other as they look onto a third woman who appears to be the same woman in the video. The ceaseless flow of their upward and downward movements express anguish which is further heightened by the low-toned strings of Johann Sebastian Bach's "Art of the Fugue."

The video scenes depict more violent scenes as the woman is exploited by the media and the church. It is the son who, implicitly is sexually exploited by a priest who appears with his sacristans behind an altar. Wittily conceptualized, this particular scene shows the priest and sacristans moving in a comical way, frantically and fanatically making signs of the cross. The woman's son sits on

the floor watching the priest and the sacristans whose real lascivious intentions are revealed when the priest approaches and caresses the boy. The counterpoint choreography in the performance area has the women turning and running upstage and downstage. As the dancers look at the video projected behind, they become witnesses to the priest's salacious acts upon the child. They dance on and around boxes which they clumsily push around. As the scenes in the video become more disturbing—a politician and the media take advantage of the woman's situation and use her as a "cause" to further their agendas—the live choreography becomes characterized by predominantly floor movements, particularly a recurring kneeling and recovering combination which give way to a series of fetus-like rolling movements on the floor. The video comes full circle when it shows the woman as she appeared in the first scene, walking towards her son who waits for her in a seemingly stupefied state. She embraces him but eventually walks away towards the horizon. Confused and shocked, the boy watches his mother leave and as she disappears from his sight; he then turns to his stuffed toy bear and stabs it with a knife, "bleeding" it to death. He does this with pent-up fury.

The riveting video shots are reinforced by the equally moving choreography with the figure of the mother walking towards the corner of the performance area, a movement that resembles that in the video when the mother leaves her son. The other dancers roll their bodies on the floor as they follow her path. In the final dramatic scene, the mother stands for a moment, looking far away, and finally falling backwards, arms spread to the sides as if being crucified. She falls as the dancers, recovering from their supine position on the floor, catch her. But then they all fall down together, and lights fade out in both the video and the performance area.

Articulated in a form that melds dance and film/video, the almost banal issues of domestic violence, sexual exploitation by the church and political opportunism are provided a defamiliarizing effect in *Payatas: Point Counterpoint*. Because the principle of counterpoint serves as the scaffolding of the entire production, the choreography and video intensify the gravity of the issue. Simultaneous with the play of light and dark evoking a sense of inevitability is the choreography in both the live performance and video, producing a sense of fate's inexorability— of a Filipino woman's fate, of the nation's fate.

In looking at various dances, in particular, contemporary dance, Spangberg (1994, 4) stresses the need for a dance that is "less about the breaking of



convention and the destroying of institutions and more that serves as a criticism, a critical self-examination". As the works of Beltran explore the relationships between past, present, and future so does her aesthetics, which although breaking from the form of ballet and modern dance, still show the influences of their techniques—the clean lines of ballet, the rich movement vocabulary and distinct twists/turns of Martha Graham, and the more natural lines of Isadora Duncan. Because Beltran's choreographies take in styles and techniques which beautifully converge into her vocabulary of "contemporary," the pieces that emerge out of the combination are rich in texture.

Thus in Beltran's works, we see contemporary choreography as a realization of how dance is both an heir of national and movement history. This may be related to how she views the role of a choreographer whose body resonates its contexts, its history. For her, the "writing of that body... then participate[s] in history" and in dancing the body's history, one also "writes the body" (Beltran 2002a, 8). The body in other words, is embedded in one's national and aesthetic history. Bones and flesh do not only embody the passage of time; they move history, they move the nation.

As such, Beltran's choreographies, which bear the traces of a number of dance traditions and historical frissons, have their own "index of tension and friction" (Spangberg 1994, 94), which allows for the creation of other narratives, conceptual or representational. Besides the tension in the bodies that contributes to the "meaning" of her works, Beltran further enriches her choreographies by acknowledging another tension—that emanating from the "presence of spectators." For her, it is in the complex nature of tension that meanings emerge. In every performance, "it is a co-presence that offers the promise of the drama about to unfold" (Beltran 2002a). It is a co-presence of both the performers' and the audience's past and present.

One sees the commitment to place the body as a moving force in history, as a source of energy that constitutes and is constituted by national realities in Beltran's works. Movement is primary to both individual and national lives. Watching *Itim Asu*, *Payatas: Point Counter Point*, and two other major works of Beltran, *Daughters of Necessity*<sup>26</sup> and *Women Waiting*,<sup>27</sup> one is reminded of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's pronouncement that "rhythm is the milieu's answer to chaos" (quoted in Henriques 2010, 77), because they are exactly our milieu's response to chaos, a way of forming narratives to make sense of the past, present, and future. These are works translating Beltran's view that "dancing is a way

of seeing things” and that dance is a protean form of art since it is “as wide as our experience of our body is” (Beltran 2002a, 5). A number of her works are readings of various narratives of our nation rendered in complex weavings of various genres such as art, music, literature, and film, all of which constitute her sense of “contemporary”.

The vocabulary of contemporary dance has thus enabled UPDC, Airdance, and Dance Forum to explore the discourse of the nation and render their own readings of this imagined community. Their works have different takes on a range of national issues; some even grapple with the very notion of history. There is an apparent effort by these groups to posit their understanding of the Philippine nation as embodied in the impetus of their choreographies. In UPDC’s deconstructions of classical ballet works such as *The Nutcracker* and *Petrouchka*, we see not just a critique of the original works but a deliberate insertion of the Philippine nation in the stories. In fact, the company’s other deconstructions of classical works such as *Mariang Sinderela*, *Ang Bagong Bayani*, *Ang Kasal*, and *Higanti* likewise inscribe the Philippine nation.

Such deliberate efforts to embed the nation in choreographies are also seen in works such as *Indios Bravos* and *Onyx Wolf/ Itim Asu* which are not strictly “adaptations” but “versions” or readings of history and an earlier work. In these works, we see the probing intellect<sup>28</sup> of choreographers and dancers who explore the complex entanglements between several junctures in Philippine history. Both works successfully take the past to the present and the present to the past as a way of reading the future of the Philippine nation.

The range of works of these groups—from deconstructions to re-readings/versions and original pieces—may be thus read as deliberate constructions of a “nation” by choreographers and dancers who consider dance—in particular, contemporary dance—an important component in the nation’s life. The interviews conducted with the choreographers reveal their awareness of the socio-political dimensions in which dance is embedded, as well as their vision of dance.

### WiFi as Narrative Communities

Any discussion of contemporary dance in the Philippines has to take into account the network of dancers and groups which has created opportunities for an exchange of movement vocabulary that has, in turn, fed the vocabulary of contemporary

dance in the Philippines. The UPDC, Airdance, and Dance Forum are three of the most prominent groups in this network, each, bringing into the network a distinct take on contemporary dance—its aesthetics, politics, and practice. Initially, annual dance festivals were spearheaded by the Choreographers' Network of the World Dance-Alliance-Philippines. However, the number and variety of activities of the choreographers' network eventually needed a separate entity to handle them, hence the creation of the Contemporary Dance Network Philippines (CDNP)<sup>29</sup> (WiFi Body Independent Contemporary Dance Festival 4 2009). The agenda of the CDNP is clear: to make a difference in Philippine society. The annual dance festival called "WiFi Body Independent Contemporary Dance Festival," launched in 2006, was conceived to follow the trajectory of the Contemporary Dance Map series which in 2005, had a "performance-tour of alternative spaces for dance all over the country."<sup>30</sup>

Since 2006, the festival has expanded to embrace two hundred thirty-two (232) dance artists in twenty (20) dance organizations, with an average of fifty (50) choreographers, and with fifty-two (52) contemporary dance premieres a year (Wi-fi Body Program 2010). It is definitely the biggest dance event in the country (Contemporary Dance Network Philippines 2010).

Despite its breakthroughs, sustaining the annual festival has not been easy; its successful efforts to gather dancers every year is a feat bordering on the miraculous. And the fact that the groups perform at the Cultural Center of the Philippines does not mean that contemporary dance in the Philippines has been recognized as a "legitimate" form of dance, let alone, a moving force in nation building. The increase in the number of participants based in the different regions of the country has not translated into more support from institutions. As director of the WiFi Fest 5, Beltran (2010) addresses a letter to the members of the network:

Regardless of the fact that our initiative has grown and satisfied if not surpassed—all the parameters given to any arts project, and which would logically then lead one to conclude that it would be given more support financially, we are now faced with the reality that we have had a 70% cut from last year's grant from our main funding source...

We are now supposed to spend an amount that is 50% of the budget we had on our first year 2006 and the lowest we have ever now received. This happens even after an increase in the number of artists, dance groups, we serve and the activities we have initiated, not counting the effects of inflation.

But the obstacles notwithstanding, these contemporary dance groups persist. In celebration of the International Dance Day, the Network held the “Moving Dance @ The LRT Dance Express” at the Legarda, Katipunan, and Cubao LRT stations in April 2010. Partnering with the management of the LRT for this public performance, the Network had artists from Airdance, UP Dance Company, Lyceum Dance Theater, Chameleon Dance, Benilde de Romancon Dance Company, and Myra Beltran’s Dance Forum, weaving their way through the crowd that watched them with much curiosity, and perhaps even amazement. As Vice Chair of the Network, Beltran explains that they wanted to “surprise the audience to the accessibility of dance.... Our concept is to blur the line between the normal and the everyday with the idea of ‘performance.’”<sup>31</sup> Thus, even with the choreographed pieces and improvisations, the works give the impression that they are “seemingly pedestrian and site-specific” (Ang 2010).

In June of the same year, in collaboration with the Ayala Malls, they “staged” the *WiFi Body @Greenbelt* (choreographed by Roselle Pineda, Jeff Carnay, and Myra Beltran), which was well-appreciated by shoppers and mallers who stopped to watch the performance and the moving “mannequins” (i.e., performance artists in various costumes, some of which were political in implication) positioned beside the windows of the Greenbelt mall. And in March 2011, in collaboration with the Quezon City Culture and Arts Council, the dancers of Airdance and UPDC performed a piece choreographed by Raul Alcosoba. Entitled *Underground (Dance-on-site)*, this was shown at the Belmonte underpass (connecting the Quezon City Hall and the Quezon City Memorial Circle) in Quezon City.

Based on the aesthetics and mode of production of Dance Forum, Airdance, the UPDC, and the CDNP, it could be said that a common vision and faith in the ability of contemporary dance to find a niche in Philippine society have kept these groups strongly motivated. It is, however, ironic that in a nation where dancers are integral to most forms of entertainment—almost every noontime show capitalizes on the presence of dancers to provide the ultimate form of enjoyment—dance in the Philippines has remained peripheral to people’s lives. Dance finds itself in a predicament as it is considered either an elite source of pleasure (i.e., ballroom dancing or classical ballet productions) or a cheap source of pleasure. It is this predicament that the CDNP wishes to eliminate. By making itself more visible—literally in streets and malls—and accessible in more intimate spaces, Airdance, UPDC, and Dance Forum have made themselves part of contemporary realities, of an ongoing choreography known as the “Philippine nation.”

In their practices, one will definitely find the tell-tale signs of what it means to be “contemporary” in the Philippines. Theirs are contemporary acts of imagining and performing the Philippine nation. It is unfortunate, though, that the strategic moves to insert their narratives within a bigger national narrative have not always been warmly received by some members of the dance community itself, in particular by those occupying positions in institutions that are crucial to the survival of the arts in the Philippines.

On 8 February 2011, contemporary dance was hit by another insensitive legislative move—the Senate Bill 2679 filed by Sen. Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. proposing to make Ballet Philippines (BP) the national ballet company (Philippine Senate 2011). Citing BP as the oldest dance company in the Philippines, Marcos also stresses that it has “expressed Filipino art and culture for the past 41 years,” both here and abroad. For most dancers and choreographers, this was surreal in terms of the bill’s absurdity; it was hinged on an idea that has been debated upon for decades—Villaruz has already written about such an idea in “Are National Artistic Companies Necessary?” in 1998 (Villaruz 2006)—and strongly opposed by independent artists. And although contemporary dance has continuously been marginalized in terms of state support and recognition, the bill still caught many by surprise considering the critical stance that the world of art has taken against hegemony, state control, and the right/privilege to represent the nation. In the event that BP becomes the Philippine national ballet company, it will not only have a 10-million-peso-per-year budget, but likewise enjoy various entitlements such as “free use of theater facilities at the CCP for performances and stage rehearsals up to 40 performances a year” and “project grants for research, documentary, new choreography, and/or production from the National Commission on Culture and the Arts” (Philippine Senate 2011). This does not augur well for the dance community, specifically for the contemporary dance community whose members, despite all their disappointments, continue to take pride in their artistic integrity. Expressing her disillusionment at the bill and how it has divided the artists, Beltran uploaded a video and text entitled “I Thought”:

I thought ... that there was not anymore one standard for beauty in dance and that beauty was measured only by our real commitment to the dance...

I thought ... that everyone understood we were all equally a part of the struggle for dance...

I thought ... that the only honor that mattered was the one not actively sought but the one which was collectively and freely bestowed

Tell me, was I then horribly, horribly wrong? (Beltran 2011)

Notwithstanding all the setbacks, the network is moving towards a direction that has enriched, though not without pain and frustration, the act of defining and dancing the “contemporary.”

Reflecting on what has happened to Philippine contemporary dance in the past decade, one is reminded of how Beltran connects the notions of trace, thought, and motion and how they eventually lead to what she vaguely calls “home.” She explains:

we see dance because it is vanishing in front of us? So we do not see it, but we are just left with a trace? Then dance is a trace we connect with another trace? And when we connect the set of traces, then we are thinking? So thought is a motion? A motion that leads us to another motion and another thought? A trace of a trace of a trace? And when we begin to know, and feel, and sense deeply, the trace in a trace, are we not in a place call[ed] HOME? (Beltran 2002b, n.p.)

This idea of motion is crucial in the reading of dance vis-à-vis narratives of the nation, or reading the nation in dances. It is the nature of motion that is so integral to dance which could make it a powerful medium by which we could illustrate the complexity of historiography. Its very nature lends itself well to the articulation of history’s making. If a written text only leaves traces, in the Derridean sense, and if a written text is characterized by a constant deferral of meanings, then what other deferrals occur in dance?

In relation to deferral of meanings which characterizes any historical text, or any text for that matter, there is something in the nature of contemporary dance that possibly also embodies the process of history making. As Beltran (1999, 1) explains, contemporary dancers concern themselves with new ways of telling stories “and yet know that in the center of that story is the body itself. Because in the body can be found the pattern that connects all living creatures.” Uncodified and constantly evolving in vocabulary, contemporary dance is able to retell stories, with an awareness of the body’s place in these narratives. As a dance form, it looks at the narrative of our nation as one that is constantly problematized, continuously reconstructed and reframed. And as contemporary dance does this, it arrives at what Beltran calls “home,” which could be another story that provides our nation a sense of grounding.

As for what really constitutes contemporary dance, UPDC, Airdance, and Dance Forum have proven that it is better to be critically open about definitions;

there is no room for rigid notions in contemporary dance. Beltran says it well when she explains that:

It would be easier if those who are wont to labeling or who insist on it, just acknowledge that contemporary dance artists exist in a continuum, and [that contemporary dance is] not a genre. This is how I feel a dance artist should be in the 21st century—free, yet respectful of and engaging in dialogue with tradition, trying to be part of history. (Beltran 2002a, 8)

Although it is a fact that the nonrepresentational characteristic of contemporary dance complements its polysemous nature, this should not give artists a convenient excuse to create works whose claim to being “edgy” borders on incomprehensibility. Villaruz, whose career both as a performer and scholar has seen the development of contemporary dance in the Philippines, has always reminded dancers that “technique is functional only as a means of expression; otherwise, it is pure mechanism (Villaruz 2006, 17).

Sharing a similar view is Noel Garrovillo, a contemporary dance choreographer based in Koronadal, South Cotabato. Delighted at the influence of contemporary dance on choreographies of street dance and dance festivals in different provinces, he is nonetheless wary of this. Impressed by the Dinagyang’s choreographic success, he has nonetheless expressed his view that there seems to be an absence of an indigenous movement in the choreographies. “Is there any tribe in Panay that has a movement featured in any of the dances during the festival? Why can’t the choreographers look for a ‘movement motif,’ such as those of the Pintadas and incorporate them in their contemporary or modern works?” he asks. He is bothered by the pathology of festivals that has resulted in choreographies not quite culturally rooted (Garrovillo 2010). In Bacolod, contemporary dancer and choreographer Dwight Rodrigazo also envisions the melding of contemporary dance with the MassKara festival which for him has so much potential in terms of providing a space for contemporary dance choreography. With Rodrigazo’s deep understanding of Bacolod’s cultural, political, and economic history and the rich story behind the MassKara festival, he will be able to integrate the vocabulary of contemporary dance into the current choreographies of street dancing. He sees the synergistic forces of dance movements that could come to play if contemporary dance be given the chance to kinesthetically enrich the fiesta (Rodrigazo 2010).

In reply to the commonly asked question “What does dance do for a society?” Villaruz responds: “It gives expression to the pulse and impulses of a

people. It is a journey toward the Filipino people and identity” (Villaruz 2006, 32). This may sound trite to most who believe in the dissolution of national borders, the multiplicity of performed identities, and in the absence of meaning in the twenty-first century.<sup>32</sup> But then again, it is best to have a concrete vision of what dance means to us as Filipinos.

Has contemporary dance contributed anything to society? In terms of imagining, imaging, and performing the nation, it definitely has. It has undeniably shared its “constructions” of the Philippine nation rendered in dance. As for its impact on society, this is a different matter. To begin with, how does one measure the impact of dance? In terms of its popularity? Its influence on cultural and political policies? If one looks at how the Philippine state and its institutions have been lukewarm towards contemporary dance, then one could say that contemporary dance has not made much of an impact on the consciousness of those in power.<sup>33</sup> But in the spirit of the independent and critical tradition of contemporary dance, its artists will continue to give us aesthetic experiences of the nation.

In his thought-provoking essay entitled “The Haunting of the Filipino Writer,” writer, literary historian, and critic Resil Mojares explains that:

...haunting is a form of desire. As the sign of what is amiss, a lack of unfulfilled, the shade of something left unfinished, it does not only point to the past but the future. It is what the Tagalog word for memory, *gunita*, signifies: to dream not only of something past but the trace of what one had desired but had not quite accomplished. To be haunted is to be suspended in dreams between past and future. (Mojares 2002, 309-310)

I would like to believe that for most contemporary choreographers in the Philippines, it is this desire that imbues their works with intricacy, with a sense of individuality that nonetheless is able to appeal to people’s deep sentiments, to their perhaps unacknowledged desire for narratives and choreographies that will bring them together as a community. It is this haunting that will continuously propel dancers and choreographers to create works that will in various ways, contribute to the telling of our nation’s story.



## Postscript

Since the writing of this essay two years ago, the UPDC, Airdance, and Dance Forum have steadfastly wrestled with the severe realities of dance in the cultural landscape of the country. This notwithstanding, these companies have given us works whose insights go beyond the genre.

UPDC has proven that dance could thrive and will continue to do so despite the lack of institutional support. The group's student dancers and choreographers have continued to intelligently create works with limited resources; the increasing number of members are forced to hold classes and rehearsals in a "studio" that has seen minimal improvements since the days when it used to be a canteen. One's shock upon seeing the miserable material conditions under which the dancers produce their works is fortunately overpowered by the range of their choreographic style and breadth of ideas. Almost every year, the company premieres original works of students required to mount their own recitals and the past two years have seen the group perform in festivals in Taipei, Kaoshiung in Taiwan, Singapore, and Thailand.

Airdance is no longer housed at the Dance Forum Studio and has its own space at Roosevelt Avenue corner Del Monte Avenue, San Francisco Del Monte, Quezon City. Under Ava Maureen Villanueva-Ong, its Artistic Director and Avel Bautista, its Managing Director, the company continues to conduct classes and workshops for dance artists, choreographers, and teachers. Its annual Airdance Idol competition has been a moving force behind the conceptualization and performance of works which have gained recognition and awards in local and international competitions and festivals.

The company's choreographers have been working with artist here and abroad. In the Philippine leg of the MAU J-Asean Dance Collaboration in November 2013, Rhosam Villareal Prudenciado Jr., Mía Cabalfin, Jed Amihan, and Chantal L. Primero and various artists from Asia performed under the direction of Fujima Kanjuro VIII, the Grandmaster of the 300-year-old Fujima School of Kabuki of Japan. The show, entitled MAU which means 'to dance' in Japanese, was in celebration of forty years of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation and featured a panoply of Asian dances (Airdance 2011).

In October 2013, Airdance and the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) staged *VOLUME* which explored the possibilities of body and movement. The show premiered works of Airdance's resident choreographers,

Fredrick Fernandez, Amihan, Prudenciado Jr., Cabalfin, and Airdance Artistic Director, Villanueva-Ong.

In December 2012, amid the Christmas rush and numerous shows and productions for the yuletide season, Dance Forum had an inaugural production in its newly renovated studio. The enormous change in the place is quite impressive; the gallery leading to the studio provides a sense of anticipation for strong creative energy, perhaps an effect of the art works and bricks lining the gallery. This sense also emanates from the new landscape of the studio—the well-arranged plants and pathways leading to the seats and the fresh and classic look of the studio's office declaring Dance Forum's vision for the years to come. But such changes mentioned pale in comparison to those in the dance studio. What is striking is the high ceiling and the repositioning of wooden risers which provide the audience with a sense of distance from the performers (I know the fourth wall is a much disdained idea but I do like the feeling of being part of an audience watching a performance). The space had morphed into a comfortable and well-ventilated theater, welcoming the audience to an invigorating atmosphere.

In 2013, Dance Forum staged *IndepenDance Forum 1: an instruction manual in low-res (reflections on Doris Humphrey's The Art of Making Dances)* a collaborative work by Beltran and Al Bernard Garcia. Revisiting the philosophy, practice, and techniques of the influential modern dance choreographer of the 1930s, Doris Humphrey (1895-1958), *IndepenDance Forum 1* presented Beltran's and Bernard's reflections on their very own practice of dance and how they locate themselves as artists in contemporary society.

The outpouring of creative force that we have witnessed in the practice of the three companies is an iteration of a thought that we hope would always inspire us—that there are no limits to what dancers and choreographers can do. That dance and its practitioners will always breathe life into the ever shifting and changing cultural landscape of the nation.

## Notes

A considerable part of this essay is based on my interviews with choreographers Steve Villaruz, Angel Lawenko-Baguilat, Herbert Alvarez, Ava Villanueva, and Avel Bautista.

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- 1 There have been quite a number of choreographies that are based on or inspired by historical novels, events and figures: Alice Reye's *Raja Sulayman* and *Itim Asu*, Basilio's *La Lampara (Jose Rizal)*, Leonor Orosa Goqingco's *Noli Dance Suite*, and Corazon Generoso Iñigo's *Sisa* (Villaruz 2006, 13; 44)
  - 2 By "narrative," I simply mean a story. I take off from the study of novels in my *Dangerous Liaisons: Sexing the Nation in Novels by Philippine Women Writers (1993-2006)* where I focused on the relation between nation, narrativity, and gender. In "Postal Politics and the Institution of the Nation," critic Geoffrey Bennington explains that "It is tempting to approach the question of nation directly, by aiming for its centre or its origin...for we undoubtedly find narration at the centre of nation: stories of national origins, myths of founding fathers, genealogies of heroes. At the origin of the nation, we find a story of the nation's origin" (in Pison 2010, 254). Although the novel is a convenient and ideal form to tell the story of a nation, dance is equally capable of "narrating" a story despite its ephemeral form. Thus, in looking at the works of three contemporary dance groups and choreographers based in Quezon City, I analyze how their works are stories of and about the Philippine nation.
  - 3 Looking at the other projects of the government in promoting Philippine culture, Villaruz is likewise critical of the NCCA's tendency to "project the Filipino's regional diversity in compendium form." He is here referring to the 2000 Dayyaw showcase in the Sambayan Festival held at the Rizal Park grounds which he sees as a small-scale version of the Saint Louis World's Fair because the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) transported to Manila tribes from the North and South, billeted them in hotel and made them perform their rites, music and dance in an open-air venue (Villaruz 2006, 207)
  - 4 For example, what nation is articulated in the standard suites that comprise Bayanihan's repertory: Mountain/Cordillera, Regional/Fiesta, Muslim, Maria Clara (European dances), and Rural?
  - 5 I discuss three other dance groups—Dance=Pull in Bacolod, the Noel Garrovillo Dance Center (formerly known as the Kahayag Community Dance and Theater Company), and the Locsin Dance Workshop in Davao—in three other essays.
  - 6 Villaruz recalls the story behind the survival of DTP. According to him, after the dissolution of the consortium with Borromeo and Elejar in 1969, Radaic single-handedly revived the DTP. First she supported it with her school's income and later, in the 70s, with twice-a-month shows at the Rizal Park. Radaic was able to secure the latter through Teodoro Valencia and the National Parks Development Committee. Radaic had a talent in managing her meager funds and actually managed to do so for the next eighteen years. Villaruz shares that she even paid for their costumes which "inspired" him "to do pieces for the park for free." He adds that "when we went on tour, she would raise local or foreign funds, or borrow.... Then she would save and save when we got back—from out of the park subsidy—and pay the debt" (Villaruz 2011).
  - 7 When he formed the UPDC in 1987, Villaruz was able to "rescue' part of the DTP subsidy" (Villaruz 2011).
  - 8 Dance majors are not required to be members of the UPDC as long as they do their apprenticeship and produce shows as one of their academic requirements.

- 9 The dance degree was started by Dean Ramon Santos and Corazon Iñigo in 1980, with the help of Villaruz who formulated the curriculum. At present, the degree has two levels—the four-year diploma (Diploma in Creative Musical Performing Arts) and five-year Bachelor (B.S. in Music, major in dance) (Steve 2011).
- 10 Quite a number of them who went to the College of St. Benilde which used to grant scholarships moved on to Ballet Philippines because of the proximity of the CCP to the school.
- 11 Having watched several Dinagyang festivals, I could say that this is probably because talented dancers from the provinces, Iloilo for example, come from national high schools that have dance teachers/choreographers trained in or at least familiar with the vocabulary of modern dance.
- 12 They have been exposed to the aesthetics and techniques of Agnes Locsin, Hazel Sabas, Flordeliza Fernandez, Christine Maranan–Novaleso, Ernest Hojjila, and Elena Lanio.
- 13 Although the definition of contemporary dance in this paper encompasses modern dance techniques, a more strict distinction between modern and contemporary dance would associate the former with choreographers Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Merce Cunningham (active between the 1920s and the 1940s) and the latter with the developments that came after these pioneers of modern dance. Graham stressed “making visible the interior landscape.” (Copeland and Cohen 1983, 232)—her technique, based on the solar plexus, is known for “‘contraction,’ a sharp, quick tightening of the stomach muscles that shoves back against the spine and ‘release’ or the burst of outward-flowing energy” (Robertson and Hutera 1990, 66); Humphrey pointed out that modern dance was “moving from the inside out”—her technique being based on “the arc between two deaths” where deaths are positions of “stasis,” standing and lying and every movement is a “recovery from these 2 absolute positions” (Robertson and Hutera 1990, 72); and, Cunningham, a former Graham company member disputed the reliance on “inner experience and emotional expressivity,”—movement, according to him, is “an end in itself”—thereby introducing another development in modern dance (Copeland and Cohen 1983, 232). All techniques were more or less reactions to the constraints of classical ballet.

Contemporary dance unlike modern dance, had not been codified, and is thus difficult to categorically define. Though it recognizes modern dance choreographers such as Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Doris Humphrey, Mary Wigman, Francois Delsarte, Merce Cunningham, Martha Graham, Rudolph von Laban, Loie Fuller, and Jose Limon as the precursors of contemporary dance, it is more of a philosophy than a set of techniques. Contemporary dancers and choreographers in the Philippines agree that the form is more or less fluid, a continuous exploration of movement and its relevance to the dancers and people of the twenty-first century. Thus, contemporary dance is open to other techniques found in ballet, modern, and postmodern dance.

- 14 One of the most popular ballet pieces that have been performed throughout centuries, *The Nutcracker* tells the story of how Clara receives a nutcracker soldier from her godfather who surprises her family during a Christmas Eve party hosted by her father. After mingling with the guests and playing with the children, Clara falls asleep out of exhaustion and dreams. Her entire room seems to grow and rats start attacking the nutcracker soldier. Clara tries to defend the nutcracker and kills the creatures. The nutcracker suddenly transforms into a handsome prince and he and Clara are transported to an enchanted grotto, which later transforms into Clara’s toy theatre. She sees her toys brought to life and everyone starts dancing. As her dream ends, her parents wake her up just as party winds down. Alone, Clara is enchanted by memories of her adventures (Balanchine and Paris 1989, 283-284).
- 15 For an elaborate and critical analysis of the irony behind Rizal’s choice of “Indios Bravos,” read Delmendo 2005.
- 16 Airdance, with Bayang Barrios, Bo Razon, and the Karangahan Folk Dance Group performed at the Philippine Pavilion.

- 17 They were also supported by then Mayor of Quezon City, Feliciano "Sonny" Belmonte, Jr.
- 18 1 Chronicles 16:34:...give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever...
- 19 Interestingly, Airdance practices the Chinese concept of an eight-letter word signifying upward movement. This idea, which was proposed by Linley Teng who owned the Outlet Yard where Airdance was first housed, embodies the trajectory of the company—keeping afloat by being versatile.
- 20 Accessibility to performance spaces is also a function of power relations. Institutions have control over "legitimate" spaces and independent dancers/choreographers/companies in the country always find themselves having to deal with the bureaucracy which has not always been accommodating to contemporary dance.
- 21 For a critical analysis of Moreno's play, read Beltran 2008.
- 22 Spangberg uses the term when he refers to a dance performance that did not foreground and reify the "trained dancer" but instead showed "a scattered history of the body." In this choreography, "history, present, future, and technology too, cross the stage with a *stereoscopic effect*" (Spangberg 1994, 95; italics mine).
- 23 In one of the shows, poet Virginia Moreno spoke at the end of the performance and said she has never seen so many dancers full of energy, running around in "panties and briefs."
- 24 The authenticity of Burgos's account is still being disputed.
- 25 Take for example the moving piece "Martyrs and Lovers" where men romantically cradle the women whose extended legs sway as their bodies are rocked. This is perhaps one of the most, if not the most moving piece in the production.
- 26 A closer analysis of the curation of *Daughters of Necessity: Women Solos in Dance* (2000) will reveal a carefully planned positioning of pieces that progress not just in terms of theme but more significantly, in terms of choreography. The collage of movements become more pronounced as one dance segues to the next, as one narrative strand of the nation's history connects to the next, as one facet of the Filipino identity builds on another. As the last piece ends and the show culminates, one realizes that the "daughters of necessity" are also the "mothers of the nation." They are women who, despite the violent imprints of the nation's story on their bodies, continue to create narratives about themselves and the country/nation. These are women walking the tightrope, daughters of a nation who have suffered from the latter's inadequacies but are nonetheless expected to nurture the land of their birth. These daughters of necessity will take it upon themselves to prop up the nation, create its story, and dance its narratives.
- 27 This point in *Daughters* is echoed in an equally powerful but more subdued choreography of an aspect of our nation's story. In *Women Waiting* (1994), three women in Maria Clara *ternos* are foregrounded as three *Inang Bayan* assisting each other, three women who have patiently danced their love for the nation. These are three women whose steadfastness and endurance will see the nation through.
- 28 Although *Indios Bravos* and *Itim Asu* draw on existing ideas and works, there was definitely that added challenge for the choreographers to push the limits of their "predecessors." Because choreographers work under the spectres of previous works, there is perhaps that additional pressure to articulate a different reading of the earlier texts.
- 29 The founding member companies are: Dance Forum, Airdance, UP Dance Company, Chameleon Dance Theatre, Kahayag Theatre and Dance Collective, and Lyceum Theatre Company.

- 30 Problematics of “space,” “place,” and “cultural geography” have been addressed by social theorists and historians such as Arjun Appadurai, Michel de Certeau, Mike Davis, Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens, Henri Lefebvre, and Saskia Sassen; art critics Victor Burgin and T.J. Clark; and literary and cultural critics such as bell hooks, Fredric Jameson, Caren Kaplan, Louis Marin, Meaghan Morris, Kristine Ross, Edward Said, and Raymond Williams. There has also been a return to the works of earlier thinkers who, during their time, had discussed the problematics of space/spatial issues (e.g., Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, Mikhail Bakhtin’s novelistic choronotopes, and Walter Benjamin’s mappings of spaces and cultural flows of nineteenth century Paris (Wegner 2002, 180-181).

Their works demonstrate how space is itself both a production, shaped by various social processes and human intervention, and a force that in turn influences, directs and delimits possibilities of action and ways of being human in the world (Wegner 2002, 181).

It must be noted that the WiFi Body Festival has also made use of alternative spaces within the Cultural Center of the Philippines and has thus, in way managed to articulate its aesthetics within the walls of the very institution that it seeks to question.

- 31 In comparing the LRT and dance, she elaborates that “Both move through space and time.... And within that encompassing frame are individuals who meet or collide briefly, whose sense of space and time intersect for a brief period within a broader trajectory of movement. For a brief time, each moves according to the space given—but each has a story to tell, and for brief periods, all meet in the same space, at the same time” (Ang 2010).
- 32 Beltran also speaks of the need to form communities as performers in the twenty-first century, a time of fragmentation, a century that calls for the need to preserve the human body. “When we speak of connecting, of integrating, one speaks, by extension, of a community, and how one forms relationships with another” (1999).

One could take the WiFi Body as a community of artists participating—consciously or otherwise— in moving the nation.

- 33 Rodrigazo is cognizant of this careless treatment of dance and lack of appreciation for the art form. It is the weak planning and conceptualizing of institutions like the NCCA and the Department of Education (DEPED) that prevent dance from pushing its limits in the provinces. Looking at the problem from a macroperspective, Rodrigazo wishes that there could be a culture of research for teachers of dance, choreographers, and well-thought-of programs in contemporary dance. He bemoans the absence of regularity in most NCCA and CCP activities supposedly envisioned to support dance (Rodrigazo 2010).

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