Projects of Reform: Indian Classical Dance and Frictions of Generation and Genre

SITARA THOBANI

Abstract: The twentieth-century "reconstruction" of Indian classical dance forms can be regarded as part of a larger nationalist push to assert a sense of enduring cultural lineage in the wake of colonization. In this paper, I examine the different ways in which the reformist logic central to this project is reproduced outside its immediate historical and social context in the work of contemporary dancers in the UK. As I demonstrate, the British multicultural context becomes an extension of the colonial encounter as the generational frictions that exist between dancers and their predecessors speak to the tensions between temporal categories that shaped, and were shaped by, coloniality.

Résumé : La « reconstruction », au XX^e^ siècle, des formes classiques de danse en Inde peut être considérée comme relevant d'un élan nationaliste plus large visant à affirmer le sentiment que la lignée culturelle a perduré après la colonisation. Dans cet article, j'examine les différentes façons par lesquelles la logique réformiste au cœur de ce projet se reproduit à l'extérieur de son contexte historique et social immédiat, dans le travail de danseurs contemporains au Royaume-Uni. Ainsi que je le démontre, le contexte multiculturel britannique devient l'extension de la rencontre coloniale, tandis que les frictions générationnelles qui se produisent entre les danseurs et leurs prédécesseurs évoquent les tensions entre les catégories temporelles qui ont façonné le colonialisme, et ont été façonnées par lui.

> "Each generation must discover its mission,
> fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity."
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> – Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 2004: 2

Now contained under the rubric "classical," several dance practices in India underwent significant "reconstruction" in the heyday of 20th-century anti-colonial politics reliant upon the nationalist claim

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of a cohesive and stable "Indian" cultural identity. These reconstructive movements, scholars have observed, delinked the practice of dance from its hereditary performers – predominantly women associated with the temples and courts, now seen to have fallen into disrepute – to sanitize it as "national" artistic heritage (Srinivasan 1985; Meduri 1988, 1996; Morcom 2013; Walker 2014). Such restoration of prestige to a supposedly denigrated cultural practice offered a positive "artistic" counterpoint to alleviate nationalist anxieties regarding the purity of the nation and the uniqueness of its identity; reclaiming dance traditions supposedly rooted in a 2,000-year-old history offered one site for the expression of an unadulterated Indian identity that predated colonization, while redeeming the dance's "essence" as high art served to disprove normative claims regarding Indian incivility (see Srinivasan 1985; Meduri 1988, 1996, 2005, 2008; Coorlawala 1992, 2004; Allen 1997; Shah 2005; Chakravorty 2008; Roy 2009; Srinivasan 2011; Soneji 2012; Walker 2014).

Within a few decades of this nationalist reconstruction, Indian classical dance forms[1] such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Odissi – each with their respective histories of emergence and development in different regions of a now unitary nation-state – were regarded as emblematic of Indian culture and tradition, not only in the subcontinent but abroad as well. Indeed, by the end of the 20th century, Indian classical dance performances enjoyed a strong presence in the major centres of the global Indian diaspora (see Ram 2000, 2005; David 2009, 2010; Srinivasan 2011). This presence has only been enhanced in the 21st century so that representations of Indian classical dance (and its related styles) are now not only familiar to, but also crossing over into, mainstream (Western) popular culture, be it in the realm of pop music (Kylie Minogue, Michael Jackson, Madonna) or at major international events (the 2012 London Olympics[2]). In this context of transnational circulation, the practice of Indian classical dance is not limited to the South Asian community as more and more Western (non-diasporic) dancers and audiences are now taking to these performance arts as well.

In this paper, I build on the important critiques of the nationalist reconstruction of Indian classical dance *in India* to examine how this project is enacted *abroad* in the transnational present. I do so by drawing on my ethnographic study of South Asian diasporic and non-diasporic dancers[3] training and performing under the banners of Indian classical and/or Contemporary South Asian Dance in the UK, arguably the largest and most established site of cultural production in the South Asian diaspora. My study is further facilitated by my own experiences as an Odissi dancer raised and trained in the diaspora, experiences that span Canada, the US, and the

UK. Beginning with the historical narratives presented by dancers invested in the "classical" foundation of their dance, I argue that both diasporic and non-diasporic dancers uphold the foundational assumptions of the reconstructive Indian nationalist movement even as they are located within, and identify with, a very different national and political context, namely multicultural Britain. As such these dancers are involved in reproducing a number of "national" narratives – that is Indian, British, diasporic, and multicultural – that are deeply enmeshed. I then expand my analysis to trace the frictions between these classically oriented dancers and those who express more "contemporary" interests that seek to "modernize" their dance. In so doing, I draw attention to the complex continuities of reformist cultural politics, crucial to the postcolonial reconstruction of the dance as well as the contemporary delineation of multiple evaluative categories of artistic practice.

The result of my analysis in this paper is twofold. First, I show how Indian classical dance continues to be constructed as the descendent of an ancient tradition through the work of both diasporic and non-diasporic dancers, particularly through their intergenerational relationships that serve to validate such narratives. This construction, of course, signals the success of nationalist reformists in expunging the undesirable elements of dance practice – represented by the abject and generalized category of *nautch* – to suture glorified antiquities to contemporary celebrations of national heritage, a success that is secured with every reiteration of this history in the present. Carried forward in these reiterations are traces of the generational frictions that marked the relationship between reformists and the hereditary performers whose cultural and artistic practices they appropriated for the purported purpose of respectability.

Second, noting the discursive grounding of Indian classical dance in a supposedly longstanding cultural tradition, I step back to argue that not only dancers but also *the very genres* in which they perform their art can also be seen to exist in generational tension. If, by positing "ancient" tradition and classical dance on a single historical spectrum dancers continue the evolutionary logic of reformist politics, their identification of Contemporary South Asian Dance as enabling "new" forms of creativity extends this logic in alignment with the cultural politics of the present. In other words, the aim to modernize Indian classical dance as Contemporary South Asian Dance reifies once more the very practices this move deems constrictive – the delineation of the traditional from the modern – as dancers become limited by the same constructs they seek to transcend. Like the classical reformists before them who operated in the context of the colonial encounter, these new

reformers experience and produce generational frictions within the dance in the cultural politics of British multiculturalism.

My argument then is not simply that the artistic practices of Indian dancers are marked by "culture" while those of the West continue to be regarded as universal, although this point does indeed represent an important and longstanding critique (see Kealiinohomoku 1969; Norridge 2010; Mitra 2015). Rather, my intention is to interrogate the very processes through which Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dancers are constructed as bound to questions of temporality in the present, tasked with the never-ending struggle of claiming historical agency – claiming, in other words, to be Subjects *with* History.[4] As I demonstrate by the end of this paper, both those who sought to classicize the supposedly corrupt nautch dance of the past, and those who wish to contemporize traditional performances of Indian classical dance in the present, are caught in generational frictions as they each constitute – in their own ways – projects of reform. Central to both projects is the urgent desire for, and anxiety surrounding, claims to cultural and historical subjectivity in the wake of the colonial situation. Premised on reformist logic, however, such claims simply extend the rippled effects of coloniality.

Grounding a Long History of Tradition

The classicizing project, like the wider nationalist impetus to secure a coherent Indian identity, was invested in generalizing upper-class, patriarchal, and Hindu/Brahmanical ideals to reflect the nation as a whole (see Sangari and Vaid 1989). Not only were these ideals said to represent India in the age of Independence, they were projected onto the past to claim an enduring history of cultural essence. Indian classical dance, with its emergent claims to a history dating back to antiquity, sustained such narratives perfectly.[5] While it was generally agreed that the dance had fallen into degradation for whatever reasons during British rule, its constitution as classical could mark a sort of return of the Golden Age of Indian – specifically Hindu – culture in the modern times of the new nation. As such, Indian classical dance bolstered nationalist claims to historical agency, which both served to imagine the past in light of the present, and to ground the present as heir to the legacy of the "past." The reformist project of classicizing dance in India must thus be situated within the larger context of colonial power, where the need to assert an enduring cultural heritage – to quite literally claim a history – was of immense political significance.

This narrative of historical antiquity, central to the 20th-century classicizing project, appears central in many accounts of the Indian classical dancers with whom I conducted fieldwork in the UK. For example, one dancer suggested that when she historicizes her dance form:

> I'm thinking of, kind of like second century [chuckles] … I guess the time that Kathak, specifically Kathak was born, it was there to communicate and inspire people. And it was done through simple narrative, and the *kathaka*, storytelling. But it was when the world – there were yogis, there were people, you know, who had clear pure objectives. Society was at a place where, you know, humanity was still there. There's so much, so much more, on a simplicity level. I think it was simplistic. Things grew from that, wonderfully. (interview, April 27, 2011)[6]

In this account, Kathak is posited as closer to nature for its origins are said to lie in a pure, unadulterated, and tranquil past. Importantly, when the dancer suggests that "things grew from that," she makes possible claims regarding the supposed connections between contemporary classical dance and ancient practices. In articulating this sense of temporal continuity, this dancer reflects sentiments that were indeed common amongst many of the dancers I interviewed, especially those who were committed to working within classical forms and not necessarily the Contemporary South Asian Dance genre I will soon discuss.

In presenting both constructs, ancient and classical, as existing on a single historical spectrum, dancers would often provide sophisticated accounts that allowed for differences between the two while still maintaining that classical dance originated in the mists of time. Take for example another account, this time from a dancer trained in multiple forms of Indian classical dance:

> I remember when I was discovering the things [about Kathak] because my Kathak teacher, she said that the first mention of Kathak as a kind of dance form is actually in [the] *Mahabharata*. [That was] the first known mention. But this means it could exist before the Mahabharata was written, which means very, very, very long ago. So we can't really know the exact age of the classical dance forms, on the one hand. On the other hand, because of this like huge British period in India, we can say that most of the dance forms, not exactly disappeared, but almost.

> And it was only the … beginning of the middle of the 20th century [that] the revival actually started. So, say Kathak, as it used to be known a thousand, two thousand years ago, and Kathak now [are] definitely two different things. And same also with Bharatanatyam and Odissi [*sic*]. But on the other hand, there are still things that kind of bring them together … 2,000 years ago and now. (interview, April 4, 2011)

Drawing on references to kathakas as storytellers (based on the Sanskrit word *katha* for story), and thus attributing the origin of Kathak to at least the Mahabharata – the Sanskrit/Hindu epic compiled in the 4th century CE – this dancer draws on a popular narrative. As Walker points out, however, while dancers continue to cite the Mahabharata in this manner, the text does not make any reference to Kathak as a dance form (2014: 36-7). It was not until the 1930s that Kathak was first referenced as such (Walker 2014: 108) – around the same time it was gaining exposure in the West with Madame Menaka's performance at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin (Chakravorty 2008: 52). Notwithstanding the speaker's acknowledgment of the potential for difference between "ancient" Kathak and its classical counterpart in the present, the assertion that Kathak originated in a time "very, very, very long ago" remains the defining feature of this account.

As the dancer quoted above suggests, the passing down of dance histories across the generations – from teacher to student (and thus to audience) – is key to the formulation of notions of enduring tradition. In short, this passing down grounds abstract ideas of antiquity via their mediation through teachers with whom students share intimate bonds. While the *longue durée* of Indian classical dance might be difficult to conceive of, the relationships that dancers forge in the present as the progeny of this history help to further instantiate the narratives of antiquity with which they associate their art. This history helps to unite dancers in a grounded sense of being related to an ongoing historical tradition; it is a history in which they can locate themselves. Indian classical dance in the present becomes the material evidence of, and heir to, notions of longstanding religio-cultural tradition as a result.

Historical narratives are, of course, products of social and cultural construction; they rely not only upon the occurrence of events, but also upon the structure of relations between those who interpret and reproduce the telling of these events (Davis 1989: 206). The authority of – and trust in – the person from whom a history is learned is therefore crucial for its legitimation. For most dancers, like the one mentioned above, *gurus* and

teachers are the ones who first provide the principal source of knowledge regarding the history of their dance and its development. This is not surprising given the diversity of knowledge Indian classical dance teachers disseminate: from the mythological stories invoked through dance performances, to the practicalities of dance and music technique, to questions of religio-cultural practices, general etiquette, and yes, historical development.

Moreover, it is not uncommon for dancers to have worked with – or at the very least to have been introduced via their teachers to – some of the key architects of the revivalist project and/or their students. A student's intergenerational relationships with their teachers thus helps make the more immediate history of reconstruction something that can be known experientially. To this end, the ability to recount pedagogical lineage is indispensable, and most dance students are able to work backwards from themselves to their teachers, and to their teachers' teachers. Indeed, many of the dancers I interviewed offered this information voluntarily without any prompting, so central is it to one's identity as an Indian classical dancer. This information is also included as part of a performer's biographic data on programme notes and sometimes in performance introductions as well, especially in more "traditionally" presented classical dance performances.[7] Pedagogical lineage indicates one way in which a sense of historical continuity is asserted and preserved, although the genealogies dancers present are never very long and usually stop at the reconstructing generation (on average three generations back from the dancers in my study).

That one's dance pedigree can be recognized and appreciated by others – even those trained in a classical style different from one's own – furthers this sense of relatedness across the boundaries of specific dance forms. Indian classical dancers not only learn the "history" of their particular dance form from one another and present it to a wider audience, they also identify with each other as a result of the generalized history they arguably share. The resulting conflation of these historical narratives, which serves to stabilize pan-Indian constructions (i.e., *Indian* classical dance), makes this history even more accessible to students outside India as specificities of time and space are further removed. This is particularly important given that most dancers in the UK do not come from or have any relation to the original "home" of their dance; for even a diasporic dancer does not necessarily share familial links to the same region as the dance they practice. This generalization of historical narrative thus enables practitioners, despite their specific backgrounds, to both identify as Indian classical dancers and distinguish themselves from their counterparts in other (non-classical) forms. The reproduction of a unified and coherent national Indian identity

in this transnational context, engendered by narratives of ancient history and pan-Indian constructions of classical dance, signals the perfection of the nationalist politics of dance reform.

Most important to the discussion at hand, it is also in response to this historical generalization that dancers can construct alternative forms of expression, as with the genre of Contemporary South Asian Dance to which I now turn. The intergenerational relationships between Indian classical dancers are therefore not the only question here, as entire genres of South Asian dance are perceived to stand in specific generational relation to one another, given the evolutionary logic that has been inherited from the colonial project via nationalist discourse. In the genealogy of Indian classical dance, the distinct but related genre of Contemporary South Asian Dance is now regularly identified in the British context as the newest addition to the family of South Asian arts. Thus a conceptual lineage is established between ancient practice, reformed classical tradition, and contemporary innovation, even as the ambiguities that surround their relatedness remain firmly in place.[8] It is the mutually constitutive relationship between these genres/constructs – that is, the generational frictions implicit in their relationship – to which I now attend. As we will see, when comparing the classicizing and contemporizing projects, this apple did not fall too far from the tree.

Recasting Narratives of Antiquity, Or the Evolutionary Schema of Indian Dance

If, following Fabian (2002), we observe the ways in which the category of the Other is a temporalizing classification that forecloses the possibility of historical agency, the narratives of temporality sustained by dancers – whether in celebration or critique – take on key political imperatives. For not only does mainstream multicultural discourse construct Indian classical dancers as static, therefore facing the burden of having to prove their own contemporary subjectivity in the postcolonial/multicultural state, India (in its association with Indian classical dance) is itself also identified as the source of this cultural stagnation (tradition) in the transnational arena.

In other words, being too closely associated with the classical/traditional/Indian can serve to deny a dancer's cultural and historical agency in the multicultural context; hence the need to engage in the distinctly British (South Asian) genre of Contemporary South Asian Dance. This sense of foreclosed agency is evidenced in many dancers' lamentations (if not outright complaints) – especially those who lean towards Contemporary South Asian

Dance – that learning Indian classical dance can rely more upon mechanical imitation and less on artistic creation. The temporalized narratives shaping Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian Dance are thus not only questions of historical periodization, but of national-cultural identity as well. For the impetus "to be Contemporary" is revealed to be a very British (albeit British South Asian[9]) pursuit.

While the supposed ancient origins of Indian classical dance appeal to many dancers and audiences alike – whether as romanticized ideals that provide an enduring sense of connectivity perceived to be lacking in other dance forms, or as marketing strategies meant to tantalize the imagination with taglines such as "Temple Dance for the 21st Century" – not all dancers share an investment in maintaining the traditions of the distant "past." For this second group of dancers, the notion of ancient tradition is constrictive, making it particularly difficult to view their artistry as innovative or perhaps even relevant to the present. Such anxieties are further amplified given the location of these dancers in British multicultural society, where the tradition/modernity split takes on particular significance as "visible minority" culture continues to contend with ghettoized and reified representations in the mainstream.

For dancers interested in the contemporizing project, a number of whom identify themselves as having advanced in their careers artistically and philosophically, it is now more desirable to speak about visual aesthetics and artistic theories when describing their dance to those unfamiliar with the form. As one Odissi dancer described:

> Usually what I try to do is make it clear that this is a classical tradition. I used to be very particular about saying it was an ancient tradition, but my opinions have recently changed on that just because there's all that kind of contentious stuff that even though it might have ancient roots, it's not necessarily an ancient practice. I don't want to get stuck in that. But I try to highlight the properties of movement, such as [telling an audience:] "you will see strong footwork, soft upper body movement, lots of sculpturesque poses." (interview, May 23, 2011)

Clear in this account is how bringing attention to the embodied form provides dancers one way of circumventing the historical narratives of which they may be sceptical. Dancers who see the form as capable of "speaking for itself" are more likely to argue that words of introduction at the beginning of performances are unnecessary, for audiences should be able to focus on

and appreciate the physicality of the performance alone.[10] By concentrating on aesthetics and body movement, dancers argue they are levelling the cultural and temporal playing field and are thus able to present their dance styles alongside other forms – such as ballet, Western Contemporary dance, or even for one Bharatanatyam and Contemporary South Asian dancer I interviewed, "Picasso paintings" (interview, March 27, 2011).

A focus on form should deculturalize (deracialize?) the dance and ground it in the present without worrying about historical analyses, it is thought. Yet the intention of these dancers to move beyond the discursive entanglement of ancient connotations notwithstanding, the very ways in which the categories upon which they rely – namely the dance forms between which they draw comparisons – are socially, historically, and discursively constructed foreclose the possibility of this endeavour. The histories that created the conditions of possibility for these dance forms in the context of colonial globality, as well as the social processes that bring dancers together in the transnational present, make impossible such a levelling of the field.

It remains to be noted that, while this group of dancers say they no longer feel comfortable presenting classical dance as ancient, they nonetheless make the conscious decision to not go to the other extreme of purposefully presenting the dance as the product of a 20th-century reconstructive movement. As such, they leave room for historical ambiguity, often by maintaining their commitment to the discursive constructions of the category "classical." The dancer cited above, for example, was sure to state her deliberate attempts "to make it clear that this is a classical tradition." Even if not immediately recognizable as connoting antiquity in the ways described in the previous section, the term "classical" invoked by this group of dancers nonetheless sustains particular constructions of temporality, however surreptitiously.

This sly construction is due in part to the ways in which, for this group of more critical dancers, the term classical is related to ideas of "classic" sometimes associated with the European Romantic Era.[11] One dancer, trained in both ballet and Bharatanatyam, captured this association most succinctly, stating that:

> Well, I think for me, I would say whether I am a ballet dancer or a classical Indian dancer, I would say I am a dancer of the Romantic mode… And then of course the Indian sentiment is quite romantic, our Romantic Era is the 11th century – [i.e.] Jayadeva[']s] Geet Govinda – and their [Europe's] Romantic Era is the 19th century... So that is really where I started Indian

> classical dance and of course it whetted my appetite to be a romantic dancer… (interview, May 4, 2011)

While proposing a different periodization for an "Indian" Romantic Era, this dancer nonetheless equates this historical stage with its supposed 19th-century counterpart in Europe, thereby finding complementarity between his ballet and Indian classical dance styles, both said to be of "the Romantic mode." In a similar vein, according to another Bharatanatyam dancer, her dance is "classic" in the sense that it has tradition and is "heavier and weightier" thus making it comparable to "other forms of art that are difficult to understand, such as opera" (interview, June 9, 2011). The idea of a "romantic" or "classic" era into which Indian classical dance forms can be grouped is thus used in both accounts to find equivalence to other Western classical traditions, be they opera or ballet. What this equation does not fully consider, however, is the extent to which the Romantic Era was itself a particular historical moment with its corresponding aesthetics and philosophies in Europe.[12] Occurring in the second half of the 18th and early parts of the 19th century, the Romantic Era saw the production of art and literature in Europe that privileged the experience of emotion as a source of aesthetics; this privilege of course was not accorded to the colonized cultures that were *simultaneously* being defined as too emotional through Orientalist logic (see Mehta 1999).

To appeal to the Romantic Era today on behalf of Indian classical dance is to thus beg entry into a movement of which Indian classical dance cannot be part. It is also an attempt to access the privilege of Europe's status as cultural agent by once more projecting European historiography onto historical developments in the Indian context.[13] By alluding to such romanticism and appealing to the sense of nostalgia it conjures, however, these dancers once again position their work as historical artifact (without the specificity of a historically defined period for this narrative spans centuries). The irony is that they do so even as they seek to get away from the untenable narrative of antiquity. Taking Indian classical dance out of an abstract ancient era situated in India, in order to locate it in a seemingly more universal (although not really) Romantic Era, dancers continue to historicize the dance as outside the fold of contemporaneity. Classical dance is once again linked to reified notions of temporality by way of its Romantic association. This is evidenced by the fact that all of the dancers I interviewed, many of whom drew comparisons between their dance forms and Western ballet, maintained that their dance was indeed older than ballet, even after they spoke of its 20th-century reconstruction. Drawing Romantic equivalence between the two forms does not deliver Indian classical dance from its archaic confinement.

Despite the discomfort dancers professed in relation to simplistic historical narratives, as well as their sophisticated (albeit no less problematic) attempts to theorize alternative definitions, when asked if it was the job of the dancer to challenge the anachronism associated with their dance form, all of the dancers with whom I spoke answered resoundingly that it was not. For example, one of the most adamant of dancers I encountered about the need to oppose constructed and stifling notions of ancient tradition, a professional London-based dancer of both Bharatanatyam and Contemporary South Asian Dance, had this to say:

> But [Bharatanatyam] has gone through a massive reformation which is actually pretty recent. So you can't really say that what we see today is the oldest thing; actually what you see today is quite new in the history of dance. So people who say it's the oldest dance style – I stopped saying that in workshops, even to children. I just say it's one of the classical dance styles of India, there are six [*sic*] forms, blah blah blah blah blah. But I stopped saying it's the oldest form … When you're teaching very young children, I don't even go into it, but when they're old enough to understand or [if you are speaking to] adults, then you do say "Well, what you see today has gone through lots of changes," So originally, a long time ago it was done in the temples and courts but what you see today isn't necessarily exactly what you would have seen [then]. Yeah, depending on how much information they can take in, you can talk about it being taken away from the social fabric of India for a period of time and then resurrecting itself in very Brahminite [*sic*] form in the proscenium theatre. But I don't want to remove the romanticism that people like and find magical about it. (interview, June 9, 2011)

In not wanting to "remove the romanticism" in her presentations, this dancer alludes to some sort of essential quality no less reifying than the state of nature desired by the Kathak dancer speaking of the longue durée of her dance style earlier. Aiming to leave intact the romance and magic associated with Bharatanatyam sustains the ambiguity surrounding its history even as dancers themselves begin to reject it on an individual basis, leaving room for desire and fantasy to remain in place. Dancers see themselves as first and foremost responsible for producing and delivering a performance that is left to the audience to interpret and believe in as they will. The mysterious spectre of antiquity thus continues to linger in relation

to Indian classical dance, even as dancers attempt to transcend the stasis this implies.

As a result, setting aside classical dance – thereby essentializing it once more as ancient, traditional, and feminine in line with nationalist ideals – in favour of more "Contemporary" platforms is presented as the clearest way to make evident one's temporal and cultural relevance. Most often focus on the embodied form is seen to contrast the cultural and mythological aspects of the dance associated with its prehistoric origins. An evolutionary schema is thus established from ancient mythological/religious/cultural dance to contemporary corporeal/physical/aesthetic dance. This is evident in the historical overview offered by an Odissi dancer with some Bharatanatyam and Western Contemporary dance experience:

> Yes, [the dance] started off in the temple, where the dancers, the devadasi dancers, they performed to the gods, just as an offering to the gods. And every time, during the prayer time, they danced for the gods. And their whole lives were devoted to the gods. Only in late … I don't know how many years ago, just within this century I think, Rukmini Arundale [Devi] changed the whole thing and brought it to concentrate on the technical form rather than the spirituality of the dance … she's the one responsible for bringing it out of the spiritual context and making it a form like [pause], to concentrate more on the dance itself … Although the spirituality exists a lot, I think she concentrated a lot more on the training, the technique and making it a pure dance … Because I think she was influenced a lot by the ballet world, which is a lot [*sic*] concentrated on the physicality, and then the emotions come in on top of that. Which is a great thing. Because the body is the first thing, the body could convey anything in the dance form. So I think that is very important as well. So coming out from there … we have come from entirely religious, spiritual to halfway now with the spiritual half *and* the technical form. And now I think we need to have the technicality and relate it to human beings rather than still holding on to the past. (interview, March 31, 2011; emphasis in spoken original)

Ballet for this dancer represents a halfway point between a spiritual dance that was not advanced in its technique and a contemporary dance that is focused purely on the body. It becomes abundantly clear that these comparisons simultaneously call upon temporal and cultural differences to posit the East

(Bharatanatyam and through it other forms of Indian classical dance) as the emotional and ancient antithesis to the technicality (science) of the modern West (ballet and Contemporary dance). It is the supposed cultural difference between "East" and "West" – and specifically the professed desirability of and aspiration towards the dynamism of the latter whilst maintaining a semblance of the cultural characteristics of the former – that ultimately enables Indian classical dancers to prove their contemporary potential. The aim to "relate" to the present "rather than still holding on to the past" is here seen to be an attempt to traverse this sense of cultural difference, an attempt that nonetheless upholds its foundational assumptions regarding the reification of Indian classical dance (India) in contrast to the innovative artistry of Contemporary South Asian Dance (Britain).[14]

Such an approach was commonly articulated by many of the dancers I observed and with whom I worked. In rehearsals, choreographic workshops, and performance productions, dancers would overwhelmingly resort to Western Contemporary dance aesthetics and exercises to explore – and make visible – the contemporary potential of their Indian classical dance practice. An annual workshop offered to encourage professional and aspiring dancers to engage in "creative" work is demonstrative of this. Held at a professional performance venue in a large town outside London, and sponsored by one of the country's foremost South Asian dance organizations, the workshop I attended began with a session led by a professional dancer trained at a prestigious London (Western) Contemporary dance school who introduced exercises specific to her form. For example, dancers were asked to experiment with group work, with each individual freezing in random positions at particular rhythmic intervals to draw attention to the larger group formation that resulted from each body. The stop-start nature of this exercise and the haphazard group orientation made it impossible to engage in such experimentation using only conventional Indian classical dance movements, which maintain a greater fluidity of movement and are primarily choreographed for soloists.[15] Some dancers incorporated *mudras* (hand gestures) into their frozen positions, the easiest way of integrating – however slightly – their Indian classical dance styles. However, this did not change the basic grounding of the exercises in Western Contemporary dance.

The workshop was extremely well received by the participants, and one troupe of dancers present included the results of its exercises in the finale of a production they would later tour across the country. However, while the workshop facilitated interesting points of collaboration and learning, it also forwarded the notion that in order to "be contemporary," Indian classical dancers must seek out and participate in exercises and movement patterns

already *defined to be* contemporary. The fact that Indian classical dancers almost exclusively collaborate with Western Contemporary forms therefore takes on greater significance in light of the historical and cultural hegemony of the West (see Erdman 2000). The Western Contemporary dance represented by the workshop leader was passed off as culturally and temporally neutral in its improvisational nature. The free flowing "creativity" of her (discipline's) approach was thus contrasted to the cultural and historical particularity of Indian classical dance that had to be reformed (anew) in order to meet mainstream demands for innovation. Moreover, contemporaneity was made synonymous with creativity itself, both in the name given to the workshop and the presentation of activities it entailed. Indian classical dance, bearing the burden of its own historical construction, was implicitly perceived to be incapable of this task relative to Western Contemporary dance.

While the nature of this workshop was understandably determined by the training and objectives of its organizers and facilitators, it was not the only instance in which the privileged ability of Western Contemporary dance to establish the norms of contemporaneity was revealed. Many of the dancers I encountered in other situations would voluntarily refer to Western Contemporary techniques in movement for example. Brainstorming sessions at dance rehearsals meant to experiment with innovation often featured exaggerated inhalation and exhalation to accompany dance movement, as well as collapsing the body and including floorwork in ways that break with Indian classical forms, focused as they are on erect bodies that rarely sit and never lie on the ground. It therefore appears that embodying contemporaneity in Indian classical dance is overwhelmingly interpreted by British South Asian dancers to mean utilizing movements they have either acquired through training in, or associate with, Western Contemporary dance.

Part of the reason for this problematic association results from the ability of Western Contemporary dance to allude to both an artistic genre as well as a temporal moment (much like the Romantic Era). In response to this problem, dancers often claim that the temporal and aesthetic connotations of the word *contemporary* posed an annoying if only coincidental confusion, differentiating between "big c" Contemporary (Western dance form) and "small c" contemporary (of the moment). However, despite this supposed irritation, these dancers nonetheless continue to resort to *both* connotations in their pursuits given that their very incorporation of Contemporary dance aesthetics (genre) results from the desire/need to be recognized as part of the contemporary moment (temporal). Dancers thus access the latter through the former. That this is achieved through the proclaimed neutrality of Western Contemporary dance – seen to be free of the cultural markings

and historical ties that buoy Indian classical dance – makes its position as something to which to aspire all the more unattainable. Rather than mere coincidence, the overlap between "small c" and "big C" contemporary reveals the West to be once again definitive of historical periodization as well as artistic categorization.

Generational Frictions and a New Project of Reform

In the multicultural context, those dancers who are not content to take on the mantle of antiquity and everything this implies must therefore provide evidence of their contemporaneity. While I have argued above that dancers in the UK most often do so through the process of creating work under the Contemporary South Asian Dance banner, important to also note are the ways in which this pursuit ironically parallels the earlier project of classicization. Attempting to rid the dance of its abject qualities (in this case, its traditional stasis), the contemporizing project similarly aims to convey a more perfect expression of its artistic potential. As is by now becoming clearer, concerns of historical periodization and artistic categorization continue to be central in this new project of reform.

Like the reformist activities that produced Indian classical dance in line with Victorian ideals in the 20th century, the imperative to "be contemporary" also rests on methods of assessment coterminous with Western definitions of Self and Other. After all, it is through Contemporary South Asian Dance that performers now claim a greater sense of self-expression, as well as the opportunity to focus on their own subjective experiences; this is in contrast to the "cultural baggage" that is regarded to be part and parcel of classical dance performance in the present. While the twentieth-century classicizing project required the negation of the dance traditions that preceded it, the contemporizing project similarly requires the reification and subsequent repudiation of Indian classical dance as historical artifact in order to signal its own status as temporally relevant. In short, like the project of nationalist reform, the task of contemporizing Indian classical as South Asian dance promotes (or at least attempts) claims to historical agency and respectability.

The project of contemporizing South Asian dance therefore resonates strongly with the reconstruction of Indian classical dance, premised as they were/are on the twinned actions of continuing a perceived historical legacy as well as breaking with a specific historical moment. Both projects also drew/draw on the elite positionalities of their architects; while classicization ensured the norms of the patriarchal and Brahmanical upper-middle class shaped the

contours of classical performance, so too do the cosmopolitan locations of present-day Contemporary South Asian dancers. It is no surprise to find that, in the British context, Contemporary South Asian dancers are more readily associated with professionalism – performing in prestigious mainstream London venues such as Sadler's Wells and The Place – while classical dancers are most often associated with the "community" performances linked with various religio-ethnic events and other cultural festivals.

Furthermore, like the patriarchal classicizing project that saw greater male authority over the female dancing body, the contemporizing project is also deeply gendered. While women constitute by far the vast majority of classical dancers in the UK, the gender ratio is practically even if not characterized by a greater representation of men when one examines demographics of Contemporary South Asian dancers. Women are once more relegated to the realm of culture (classical dance), while men are celebrated for their professionalism and innovation (Contemporary South Asian Dance). Not only does this dynamic code classical dance as feminine once more, thus reinforcing the nationalist logic concerned with female propriety that was at the heart of the classicizing project; it marks contemporary innovation the purview of the professional (increasingly male, cosmopolitan) elite (for more, see Thobani 2017). Whereas nationalist reformists articulated their concerns for respectability in regards to sanitized female sexuality, contemporary innovators aspire to the respectability of professionalism in ways that are no less gendered.

Moreover, while the construction of Indian classical dance was central to the task of subject formation in the new nation, the development of Contemporary South Asian Dance is instrumental to (diasporic) subject-making in the UK. This explains why, relative to Indian classical dance, Contemporary South Asian Dance boasts so few non-South Asian performers. It therefore becomes impossible to argue that Contemporary South Asian Dance is simply a new artistic and aesthetic genre; it is the South Asian dancer's *racial-cultural identity* that serves first and foremost to classify them in this way. By comparison, a white dancer is much more likely to be seen simply as a Contemporary dancer, with all the artistic agency this supposedly acultural category enjoys (see Norridge 2010). Like the translocal architects who spearheaded the classicizing project in the colonial context,[16] this group of "new reformists" are also shown to negotiate the politics of race as they create work in the context of a diaspora space (Brah 1996) that brings together racialized and non-racialized subjects. Like the nationalist reformers who sought to claim artistic agency, this new generation of dancers is also trapped by the very discursive constructions they wish to transcend.

Conclusion

As I have sought to demonstrate in this paper, despite their different invest-ments, dancers of various forms of South Asian (classical and Contemporary) dance all participate in the ongoing production of a historical narrative that posits Indian classical dance as both timeless and ancient. This construction is consistent with, and ensures the success of, the reformist logic that sought to salvage national heritage in ways that were calibrated to the fact of colonialism. The power of History (master narrative) in securing agency for those who can claim it is evidenced in the colonial context through which Europe emerged as pre-eminent Historical Subject. This power is also discernible in the nationalist struggle for Independence whereby it became imperative to prove to the nation that colonialism had not harmed the integral fabric of its culture (Sarkar 1998; Chatterjee 1999; Fanon 2004 [1961]; Lal 2005; Nandy 2009). Symbiotic with this process is the ability to demarcate those to be denied historical subjectivity, and thus cast out of the category of modernity as History-making (Wolf 1997; Chakrabarty 2008). Discourses of temporality, in short, determine one's sense of being and belonging.

It is in this wider context of historical tension that the reconstruction of Indian classical dance must be placed, and not just in relation to the reproduction of an Orientalist script. In reasserting a dance seen to have fallen victim to colonial rule, nationalist reformists could, and indeed did, claim the rights of artistic, cultural, and historical agency. This is why, in continuing to project onto antiquity a history we know to be flawed, if not erroneous, dancers now contribute to the reassurance of/to the Indian nation that colonialism did not mark the end of their culture, however constructed it may be. Located in the UK however, such performances further temper concerns pertaining to a history of colonial violence, for the British mainstream is also offered evidence that their imperial past may not have been so damaging after all. Such performances also assure the British nation that its own practices of cultural consumption – and the privileged status this entails – are secure in the transnational present. The history of Indian classical dance, which brought together people, ideas, and images from across the colonial divide, has many roles to play indeed.

In the current context of multicultural Britain, Contemporary South Asian Dance promises – but not necessarily delivers – the ability to claim one's mastery over history, reifying Indian classical dance, as tradition and culture, once more. The relationship between Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian Dance in the British context is thus temporalized;

this is a relationship that operationalizes discourses of tradition and modernity and projects onto Indian culture an evolutionary schema that presents it as static once more. Ongoing concerns with respectability (as professionalism), as well as assertions that Indian classical dance (as ancient relic) must be transcended in order to enable Contemporary innovations, demonstrate the long-standing mark of coloniality on dance practices, and by extension the political contexts of their performances. Despite the many innovations dancers have made over the last century, the attempts of both reformers and new reformers to negate their predecessors in search of a more perfect form have failed to call into question the very construction of the categories they aim to transcend. In short, they have failed to challenge the legacy of the colonial situation.

For just as classical dance in the 20th century was defined in relation to Western classicism by *Indian dancers themselves*, so too is Contemporary South Asian Dance identified in line with Western Contemporary dance *despite* its insistence on maintaining a link to South Asian culture, however loosely defined. This illusive search for respectability continues through strategic appeals to temporality, appeals that reveal intergenerational tensions between both dancers and genres. Importantly, the similarities and frictions between contemporizing and classicizing efforts, both projects of reform in their own right, do not merely signal a repetition of history. Instead, these serve to highlight the very ways in which this history has been constructed to allow a privileged few entry (however precarious) into the fold of national belonging, be it in the age of Independence or the transnational present. Put simply, frictions continue across the generations, from the nautch dance that was "civilized" to become classical art, to the Indian classical dance now being "rejuvenated" as Contemporary South Asian Dance.

Framing the discussion in the way I have is not at all to discount the merits of either Indian classical or Contemporary South Asian Dance; nor is it to suggest that South Asian dances – classical or contemporary – exist merely as derivative forms. Rather, it highlights the extent to which the very definition of dance styles is an enactment of a historical narrative that comes from a particular context, that of cultural imperialism, nationalist reclamation, gendered and caste-based dispossession, and the subsequent contemporary politics of identity formation. Such are the generational frictions that mark the history of Indian classical, and now Contemporary South Asian, dance. One thing remains clear: these histories – and the power relations that sustain them – are still in the making.

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Notes

1. There are currently eight designated forms of Indian classical dance; my research focuses on the three most prominent forms in the diaspora, Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Odissi. While distinctive in style, they are nonetheless categorized together under the rubric "Indian classical dance." It is in this term and its attendant discourses that I am interested, for the category represents one immensely popular site wherein dancers and audiences help construct and experience a coherent and unified Indian national culture and identity, in India and abroad.

2. For example, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) organized a "Mini India" showcase in London to correspond with the 2012 Olympics. During this time, leading British South Asian arts organization Akademi also presented a lavish production of Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian Dance at the British Houses of Parliament as part of the Cultural Olympiad. Noted British Kathak and Contemporary dancer Akram Khan was also featured in Danny Boyle's Opening Ceremonies for the Olympics. Although Khan and his Company performed in a genre commonly identified as Contemporary South Asian Dance, the former's identity as an Indian classical dancer was central in the discourse surrounding this performance.

3. Although I do not identify the ethnicity of the dancers from my fieldwork cited in this paper, it should be noted that my research group consisted of dancers of South Asian (diasporic) as well as non-South Asian (predominantly white) descent. The majority of Indian classical dancers outside India are indeed of South Asian origin, and this was reflected in my research sample. However, when I refer to Indian classical (or even Contemporary South Asian) dancers, these designations should not necessarily be interpreted as markers of racial identity. For a more detailed analysis of race and ethnicity in relation to diasporic and multicultural performances of Indian classical/Contemporary South Asian Dance, see Thobani (2017).

4. For more on the politics of history-making and the constitution of subjectivity, see Lal (2005), as well as Wolf (1997), and Chakrabarty (2008). To have History is, of course, to have a history that is ongoing; it is to be a Subject in the present, that is a modern Subject.

5. This is not to suggest Indian classical dance was the only example of cultural production to do so. Its narrative framing, spectacular appearance, sensual appeal, and ability to be performed in various contexts does however provide excellent conditions for the extension of the nationalist project.

6. I have endeavoured to maintain the anonymity of the dancers with whom I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, be they established professionals or hobbyists. I do mention by name those more established dancers and organizations whose work is part of the wider public record in the UK and is specifically analyzed as such in this paper.

7. Such consistent mention of lineage by classical dancers is in stark contrast to the ways in which Contemporary South Asian dancers present themselves, as the latter tend to focus on individual biography (i.e., the Western Contemporary dance institutions at which one has trained, the grants and awards one has received, the form/s of Indian classical dance in which one is experienced, etc.). This difference could be due to the relative lack of institutional structures for Contemporary South Asian dancers, who most often train in Western Contemporary dance and apply this training to their choreographies in the emerging South Asian genre. It also suggests differences in approach between Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dancers, the former prioritizing tradition and collective lineage, the latter contemporaneity and individual subjectivity.

8. The relationship between Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian Dance styles are complex, and it is often difficult to distinguish the ways in which practitioners of the latter relate to the former in their performances. As one classical dancer told me, "Contemporary, yeah, very interesting isn't it. For me, contemporary is anything that's not classical" (interview, March 22, 2011). In this paper, I am specifically discussing Contemporary South Asian Dance – a genre in the British art scene – and not the development of Indian Contemporary dance, which emerges in India. While comparing the two would no doubt be interesting, I maintain the importance of first situating each genre in the particular social and political contexts of their performance. For more on Contemporary South Asian Dance in the UK, see Norridge (2010) and Mitra (2015).

9. Notably, while more and more non-South Asian dancers are taking up training and performing as Indian classical dancers in the UK, when it comes to the genre of Contemporary South Asian Dance, almost all of the practitioners are of South Asian origin. This dynamic raises interesting questions regarding the interests and desires of dancers wanting to pursue different "cultural" forms of dance, questions which are unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.

10. O'Shea (2003) suggests that including such introductions to explain Indian classical dance choreographies began abroad in the 1980s, and argues that this practice then moved back to India. According to her, these introductions act as a translating device through which the English language is used to make Indian classical choreography intelligible. This dynamic, however, presents English as purely verbal with no cultural coding, while the Indian classical dance performance is seen as entirely cultural with no room for choreographic interpretation (2003: 177-8). However, as some dancers argue, foregoing the use of introductions entirely does not dispel the overdetermined connections drawn between Indian classical dance and culture, leaving as it does the task of contextualization incomplete. The debate remains ongoing.

11. The appeal to the "classical" that is inherent in the term Indian classical dance should not be confused as an association with the Classical Era, which focused on aesthetic form and preceded the Romantic Era in Europe. Rather, the term "Indian classical dance" was used by nationalist reformists in an attempt to garner legitimacy for their arts, placing them on par with Western traditions such as ballet.

12. As scholars have noted, defining Romanticism in Europe is itself a complicated task, given the elusive regional and temporal identity of the term. For more on the historical development of the concept in Europe, see Grout, Burkholder, and Palisca (2005 [1960]); Brown (2006); Breckman (2007); and Barker (2012).

13. For more on the longstanding practice of conflating European historical categories with historical developments in India, central to colonial knowledge production, see Sarkar (1998: 17-20).

14. For example, many of the Contemporary South Asian dancers and producers I met were adamant in their views that the work produced under this banner in the British context was decades ahead of Contemporary Indian dance in India. Investments in the evolutionary ladder prove difficult to disengage.

15. Of course, group choreographies do exist in Kathak, Bharatanatyam, and Odissi but these are more often than not variations of dance pieces originally conceived of as solos, restaged for several dancers to perform together.

16. For more on the transcultural actors who shaped the development of Indian (classical) dance, see Allen (1997); Desmond (2001); Meduri (2004, 2005); Srinivasan (2011); Thobani (2017).

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