

Remobilizing Dance Studies

Jens Richard Giersdorf and Yutian Wong

Opening Remarks

Randy Martin once proposed that “Dance studies, properly reconstituted, promises to help materialize in thought a whole series of problems that have run homeless through the academy as well as through the world” (Martin 1998, 181). Writing in 1998, Martin and his contemporaries attempted to ground dance within the academy and rectify the unmooring of dance from the humanities and the alienation of dance from serious critical inquiry. Dance’s homelessness within the academy would operate as the metaphor through which other “homeless” knowledges of bodies and bodily practices could find a place within academia through dance studies as an academic discipline (Martin 1998, 181). In the decade since Martin’s proposition, dance studies has come into its current form, with multiple incarnations of dance proliferating in radically different spaces, both literally in actual physical and virtual spaces and metaphorically in different intellectual spaces. Given the establishment of dance studies as an academic field since the publication of *Critical Moves* (1998), this essay invokes a critical inquiry into the politics involved in the disciplinary formation of dance studies and in the way we talk about dance. This will allow us to address the politics of ontological concerns regarding dance and epistemological developments in our field, specifically in an Anglo American and European context. We begin this essay from a place in which dance and dancing have become crystallized inside an academic discipline, and we ask what the presently accepted parameters of intellectual meaning making are when it comes to dance and how current practices of dance studies can be remobilized to revitalize our discipline’s political potential.

Beginning in the 1980s in the United States and the United Kingdom the academic turn in the humanities toward cultural studies, critical theory, and identity politics informed the study of the arts as a nucleus of social structures. In dance, this turn toward theory was accompanied by a shift from a modernist emphasis on technique and expression toward a postmodern investigation

Jens Richard Giersdorf (jgiersdorf@mmm.edu) is Professor of Dance Studies at Marymount Manhattan College in New York City. He is the author of *The Body of the People: East German Dance since 1945* (Wisconsin, 2013), which has been translated as *Volkseigene Körper* (Transcript, 2014), and coeditor of *Choreographies of 21st Century Wars* (Oxford, 2016) with Gay Morris. His work has been anthologized internationally, and his articles have appeared in numerous scholarly journals. Giersdorf is a member of the editorial boards of SDHS and CORD.

Yutian Wong (ytw@sfsu.edu) is an associate professor of dance in the School of Theatre and Dance at San Francisco State University. She is the author of *Choreographing Asian America* (Wesleyan, 2010) and editor of *Contemporary Directions in Asian American Dance* (Wisconsin, 2016). Other recent publications include essays in *Short Film Studies* and *Choreography and Corporeality: RELAY in Motion* edited by Thomas De Frantz and Philipa Rothfield.

of choreography that locates the ontology of dance and embodiment as central to the subject of dance itself. The turn toward theory in dance would appear to mirror intellectual developments in other art disciplines, such as art history, theater history, literary studies, or film/media studies; however, these fields are often recognized as separate academic departments or named as a separate field of specialization within academic departments. A department of art and art history names and separates historical and theoretical discourse from actual art making, whereas the study of dance under the rubric of “Dance” has remained institutionally and epistemologically wedded to dancing (Giersdorf 2009).

Due to the institutional positioning of dance in the academy, the emergence of dance studies as an academic discipline in the U.S. and U.K. occurred out of twinned choreographic and intellectual trajectories in which dancers and scholars working from within dance were concerned with the conscious investigation of the politics of social embodiment. In contrast, dance studies in continental Europe was often established by scholars predominantly trained in the humanities and social sciences who applied methodologies from fields like literature, philosophy, sociology, and theater studies to dance. Even though these differences initially created radically different methodologies and definitions of politics in the discourses of English speaking and non-Anglophone scholars working in different national contexts, these differences have been sifted through a global academic exchange and the incorporation of non-Western national discourses originating in the global South and Asia.

As a result the current academic approaches to dance worldwide may be broadly categorized in three interrelated areas: dance as method and site of political agency; dance practice as research; and the ontology of dance. In order to establish dance studies as an academic field in the U.S., scholars—among them Randy Martin—attempted to recast dance and choreography as a method rather than an object of study.¹ In their work, choreography and dance become models for accessing, organizing, and destabilizing political, structuralist, and postcolonial enquiries. This approach provided a methodology for similar investigations into questions of gender, race, sexuality, class, and nationality in relationship to the politically transgressive possibilities of dance.²

This strategic move toward theory represents a conscious repositioning of dance studies with respect to dancing. In response to the turn toward theory, dance scholars began to reframe dance practice as research by turning toward phenomenology, body-centered discourse, and social justice movements to demonstrate how acts of dancing have the potential to disrupt academic hierarchies around theory versus practice. Practice as research provides the material solution to logocentrism by privileging the immediacy and efficacy of embodiment. This approach to dance studies can also privilege the sensate experience of the body as that which enables a better-informed understanding of dance and of what it can do.³

Contrary to the immediacy and the specificity of the materiality of dancing bodies and the agentive possibilities of choreography, a third approach considers the ontology of dance as an end in and of itself. This approach seeks to understand what dance is as a universal category and how a structural understanding of dance can enable a comprehension of the ontology of other social structures. For instance, by dissecting the unique ways that dance is inherently political, Dance Studies contributes to theorizations of politics and aesthetics simultaneously. Even though the third approach engages with specific choreographies or techniques, the issue is not the intervention in a specific system, but rather the performance of a general and abstract discourse on the philosophical, aesthetic, and political potentialities of dance as a generalized category.⁴

It is important to remember that these broad categorizations are not necessarily discrete and that it is possible to theorize dance across these three discourses. The reality though looks different, and scholars—depending on their nationality, disciplinary affiliation, and academic generation—often assign themselves exclusively to one of the three discourses. In Martin’s assessment of dance studies

and dancing in 1998, dance studies was not yet solidified such that its market value within academia demanded heightened specialization. Martin's belief in the transformative and resistive potential of dance studies within academia was thus optimistic. Writing in 2011 in the wake of the global financial crisis, Martin did not name dance studies specifically in his observations of the increasingly professionalized and privatized academy, but his critique of the managerial relationship between administrative and faculty interests gestured toward a more pessimistic view of what dance studies might or might not have achieved within the institutional organization of academia as the loss of academic autonomy becomes an organizing principle for new relationships to administrative labor (Martin 2011).⁵

In this essay we are guided by the potential of Martin's earlier assessment of dance as political action, in which he demands a self-critical analysis of mobilization to incorporate an understanding of what allows it to "be possible, then to notice what allows it to continue, and finally to evaluate what it facilitates and what it limits with respect to the larger project of social change in the service of which the analysis is presumably operating" (1998, 10). This essay is concerned with exploring the multiple ways that framing dance as method, practice, and ontology can intersect for the purpose of working through how the discursive power and disciplinary investments of each approach give form to the object of study. To accomplish this, we invoke a fictitious choreography that engages all three approaches by attending to specific contemporary issues in dance studies, such as a critique of American identity politics, the disruption of chronological dance historiography, the often assumed referentiality of dance reconstruction, the power of academic habitus, and the assumptions of what counts as dance and as a critical investigation of dancing.

To address the conciliatory move to bring seemingly discrete academic interests in dance studies into conversation and to contextualize the form in which this essay is written, we provide an account of a historical improvisation. For us, the authors, "Remobilizing Dance Studies" is about creating and giving shape to an unknown—the dance historiography of an East German Vietnamese folk dance called *Spring in Vietnam* that is given a future by manipulating the historical evidence of its existence. Our essay, written as a scripted performance, treats the research process itself as a structured improvisation that juxtaposes unlikely historical, theoretical, and methodological fragments in an effort to find unexpected coincidences and meaningful contradictions between dance as a method, practice as research, and the nature of dance. Like a dance that combines fragments into an unstable whole, our paper presents a series of narrative motifs that are renarrated as themes and variations. These themes are linked into a loosely knit metanarrative that questions itself in the end. This paper narrates an intellectual process unfurled; however, it purposefully revels in dead ends, false starts, restarts, sudden stops, trailing endings, and revisitations.

Remobilizing Dance Studies

Cast of Characters (in order of appearance)

Giersdorf (German for greedy village) male, 172 cm, "redhead," blue suit
Wong (Chinese for king with water prefix) female, 5' 4", black hair, tall boots

The Setting: A conference room or auditorium

Giersdorf: *remembering*

In the spring of 1995, Randy Martin taught a graduate seminar on Moving Bodies/Making Politics to the first cohort of PhD students in Dance History and Theory at the University of California, Riverside. Grounded in Marxist, post-Marxist, feminist, queer, postcolonial theory, and social movements, none of the readings addressed dance directly because the dance itself was assumed

as object while theory functioned as a practice. Theory would reconstitute the dance and the attendant meanings of both its form and content. Or as Martin phrased it on the syllabus: “The aim of this course is to effect a double movement: to infuse political theory with dance, and dance with political theory” (Martin 1995). Given the centrality of Marxist theory in Martin’s work as a way to force an investigation into production, value, and consumption of movement as well as how dance-as-movement and political movements become or affect other structures, dance studies is produced as an object of study. Martin’s seminar would thus provoke an investigation into the bodies of theory that make up the academic habitus—what we as dance scholars practice at once methodologically, theoretically, and corporeally. Much like his later writing on interdisciplinarity and the academy, we ask what are the intellectual accoutrements necessary to constitute a disciplinary object. The intellectual apparatus comprises the various theories, methods, and politics used in combination to become the different disciplinary engagements with dance that emerge from varied academic perspectives.

It must have been too much theorization. We had to dance it off. We had just answered Gayatri Spivak’s question “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and read Edward Said’s definition of orientalism, followed Aijaz Ahmad’s critique of Frederic Jameson’s understanding of Third World literature, assessed Arjun Appadurai’s “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” and moved with Jean Franco “Beyond Ethnocentrism.”⁶ We were exhausted from: sitting (*pause*), criticizing (*pause*), questioning (*pause*), reevaluating (*pause*), reconstructing (*pause*), and emancipating (*pause*).

Having arrived home after our seminar, we needed to let loose. We needed to dance out our reactions to all of these complex theorizations. The result? A deceptively simple choreography loaded with a set of complex subtexts. Our dance was this: a parodic interpretation of a dance celebrating revolutionary Vietnamese freedom fighters in the war against US aggressors as it would have been choreographed by an amateur East German dance company.

There we were, two doctoral students dancing out a complex historical postcolonial situation through the lens of the socialist propaganda machinery—in a living room in Riverside, California. It went like this:

Wong: friendly and conversational

This project began as a moment of misrecognition sometime in the late 1990s when my collaborator, Jens Richard Giersdorf, and I were graduate students at the University of California, Riverside. I had just begun writing about the work of a Vietnamese American performance collective called Club O’ Noodles, and Jens had begun his project on corporeality in East German political demonstrations and *Tanztheater*.⁷ At some point during a discussion about our research projects I tried to explain to Jens how Club O’ Noodles’ critique of Hollywood stereotypes confronted the limited confines in which Vietnamese people in the U.S. were framed within discourses of the Vietnam War. The Vietnamese woman-as-prostitute and the anonymous pajama-clad Viet Cong enemy dominated mainstream Hollywood (American) film discourse, whereas the mainstream American news media focused on the tragic figure of the Vietnamese refugee. I tried to situate all of this with the influx of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants to the U.S. in the 1980s that caused widespread panic and confusion. Vietnamese refugees were at once conflated with the enemy and upheld as pitiable victims requiring rehabilitation. Jens finally admitted to me that he had no idea what I was talking about. As a former East German citizen, the Vietnamese invoked a completely different set of associations. Until 1989, the Vietnamese guest worker in East Germany was a comrade-in-arms—a heroic figure who fought victoriously against a capitalist aggressor. After reunification, the now stateless Vietnamese immigrant was the guy who peddled cigarettes on street corners in the former East Germany (German Democratic Republic). Neither of us recognized each other’s point of reference. We let it go at that.

In the delirium caused by variously productive writing sessions, procrastination, and the general yet persistent low-grade anxiety that accompanies graduate school, it happened. We were discussing the question, “How would you define Vietnamese American dance?” The question could be interpreted in multiple ways. It could be an aesthetic issue. One could follow Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s lead and ask: Is there a set of aesthetic features that make a work characteristically Vietnamese American?⁸ It could be about a larger question of framing. How was I including what I was including in a project on Vietnamese American dance? In the context of the 1990s, the question could signal the way in which the group emerged onto the performance arts scene in Los Angeles as the first Vietnamese American performance ensemble whose mission was to create socially conscious dance theater and tell stories about Vietnamese American immigrant experiences. Thirty years after the emergence of ethnic studies, Asian American artists, writers, and intellectuals were grappling with two competing narratives that had emerged in US ethnic studies. The first was informed by the transformation of 1960s cultural nationalism in which identity politics tied to social activism and community empowerment—expressed in poetry, literature, and art—was informed by individual or shared community experiences. The second was informed by an intellectual discourse in which race and ethnicity were no longer biographical givens but understood as social constructions that could be manipulated and performed through various cultural and political practices. Both claimed to work in the vein of social justice; however, academic battles between identity politics and theory emerged, asking how social justice should be or could be achieved. Tired of analytical vigilance, I demonstrated a sarcastic choreographic joke that referenced a scene from Club O’ Noodles’ *Laughter from the Children of War* (1995) and various Hollywood films where people donning conical straw hats are shouldering rifles and planting rice to the sound of helicopters flying. The joke was that Vietnamese American dance could be reduced to three gestures: The first, arms held above the head like a triangle; the second, a rhythmic motion bending the torso forward with the arm extended then standing back up, and the third, the pantomimic gesture of holding a machine gun at waist level while swiveling the upper torso from side to side. It was a horrible moment.

Giersdorf: *with a look of slight shock*

“I can’t believe you did that”

(long pause)

“I’m so telling someone you did that”

Wong: *with a look of slight disbelief*

(... a long silence ...)

Giersdorf: *demeanor softens*

“You know ... there actually were dances that looked just like that in East Germany.”

Wong: *surprise followed by relief*

“What?”

This moment: the abominable dance (aka the Asian American *faux pas*) and the revelation of its existence lay dormant over the years. Its memory was triggered every so often with a joke, “we should try to do something with our East German Vietnamese idea; we should reconstruct the dance. And with the joke came numerous discussions on what such a hypothetical reconstruction could look like, each imagined reconstruction more postmodern (in a postmodern dance meets postmodern theory conceit) than the last. The choreographic details about the dance would leak out while we were chopping vegetables in the kitchen, and these details usually consisted of the

parodic, the sarcastic, or other ridiculous summoned borne out of the belief that the subject was both fascinating yet improbable. What would be the point of such a project?”

Giersdorf: friendly and conversational and becoming serious

Yutian, a Chinese American, had just started research for her dissertation on Asian American performance by attending the rehearsals of Club O’Noodles—a Vietnamese American performance group—and I had just started to make sense of my former dance career in an amateur dance company situated in the East German dance scene.

The initial *foray* into each of our individual projects was in many ways initiated by our own individual biographies, not only in the sense of personal biography, but in that of nationally specific educational systems. Coming from a German educational system that maintains the tradition of *Bildung*, my theoretical frame was informed by a concept of culture as a regulatory perspective and object of education (Giersdorf 2009). It is regulatory because culture functions as a controlling mechanism in human development to avoid negative side effects, such as the destruction of nature or civilization. Culture in this discourse is decisive, nationally demarcated. As a result universities (and in many European countries also theater) are major state institutions supporting the construction of national identification and the bourgeois—or in my case, the socialist—citizen as national subject.

Yutian, on the other hand, was educated at large public American land grant universities where public funding for the production or acquisition of knowledge had been justified as the most direct path toward economic productivity on a state level and social (upward) mobility on an individual level. An American college education at a land-grant university promised vocational training in appropriate “middle-class” occupations or at least a degree that would be recognized as a social prerequisite for middle-class work. When the role of the degree takes on that of a social prerequisite rather than a direct path toward a specific job, it begins to take on (or hearken back to) the qualities inherited from the *Bildung* from which the bourgeois citizen emerges. Thus begins a cycle in which academics are charged with justifying the direct, or at least not too indirect, value of their work as productive labor. Or in Adorno’s terms, I am a product of *Kultur*, and Yutian is conditioned to function inside of culture (Giersdorf 2009).

With the exception of a reference to Vietnam, there were no temporal or local meeting points in our thinking and theorizing at the time. Even our understanding of Vietnam and of dance differed. Influenced by distinct historical, political, and institutional constructs, Yutian’s Vietnam referred to the Vietnam of the American War fought from 1965 to 1975. This was the origin of the so-called boatpeople who after the Fall of Saigon in 1975 fled Vietnam in wooden boats in search of asylum. Jens’s Vietnam was that of the socialist brotherland,⁹ which successfully defended itself against “American imperialists.”¹⁰

Thus, our choreography on that fateful afternoon communicated the intersections of our nationally specific understandings of recent Vietnamese history and diaspora. Most important, it was a choreographic representation of politicizing postcolonial theorization, minority discourse, and the disciplinary inculcation of the seminar table.

The choreography was composed of a simple structure—a repetition of easily recognizable everyday gestures performed in a linear sequence. Associated with Vietnamese folklore, especially *Múa Sạp*, the “bamboo” dance, it was performed in a triplet—a bouncy and rhythmic one-two-three, one-two-three. This pseudonational determination was made more concrete through the gesture of planting rice, putting on a conical straw hat, and finally shouldering and aiming a machine gun. The movements were simple and repetitive because they were supposed to reflect the style of a fictitious amateur choreography.

While we had a lot of fun with our parodic choreography, we were fully cognizant of its political incorrectness within a U.S. context. Of course, we never performed it or talked about it in any other arena; however, we utilized small parts of the choreography to communicate to each other the strategic utilization of theorization, such as the consideration of postcolonialism, diaspora, and nationalism. We also used it as a shortcut to signal the detection of deceptively universalist theories and movements encountered across conference rooms and seminar tables. In our case the seminar table was located in California where, in the 1990s, the state witnessed the passage of a series of anti-immigrant state initiatives that brought to the fore the legal stakes in which categories of race, gender, and citizenship operated as social regulators of everyday life.¹¹

The discrepancy between anti-immigrant initiatives and California's reputation as a cosmopolitan site where people escape in order to undergo a cure and refashion their lives to perform new identities without conventional markings proved to be fertile ground for a shared theoretical approach influenced by postcolonial and minority discourse. (Will the visa be renewed? Who is eligible for funding? Who will our students be?).¹² Our moves between the living room and the seminar table were emblematic of the national discourses shaping Dance Studies in the U.S. at that point.

Wong: *casual but serious*

This explains why we are now having an academic *coming out* with our fictitious and seemingly private choreographic *faux pas*. Our disclosure acts as a reflection on the disciplinary formations, resulting in a series of events or chain reactions. We can think of this disclosure of events as a form of highlighting our distinct individual, national, and academic trajectories toward the creation and authorization of disciplinary discourses.

Giersdorf: *matter-of-fact*

To accumulate such academic authority, I started my research for the dissertation in the 1990s at the *Tanzarchiv* (dance archive) in Leipzig. Over the course of several summers, I broadened my collection of archival facts to other institutions to gain a larger picture of the East German dance landscape in order to analyze dances styles and reconstruct specific choreographies. In addition to dance ethnography, archival research, dance analysis, and reconstruction remain the methodological pillars of dance historical research. The subjective influence of the archivist, the researcher, and the reconstructor pursuing archivization, archival research, analysis and reconstruction is not always recognized within the methodological hierarchy of dance studies. Ethnography is often considered the go-to methodology when the institutionalized "archive" is believed not to exist. But that is another story (Wong 2010).

Wong: *slightly annoyed, interrupting Giersdorf*

Back to our project. We have Jens, on a rainy summer day in 1998, working through material on East German amateur and folk dance at the *Tanzarchiv* in Leipzig in the fashion of traditional dance historiography. He was not surprised when he found records of amateur choreographies depicting the Vietnamese liberation in the collection of the archive. For instance, the anniversary publication of the dance festival in Rudolstadt in 1967 proudly presented the first dance company from a small town that choreographed a Vietnam scene (Ridlan 1967). Other companies followed. There was the dance group of the chemical plant in Buna's *Help Vietnam!*, while the amateur ballet company of the workers' union in Halle "provided a dance that denounced the criminal transgressions of the aggressors" (Ridlan 1967, 17). In 1966 the dancers of the German postal service in Cottbus choreographed a scene about Vietnam, the dance ensemble of the Neptune shipyard in Rostock created *A Vietnamese Day*, and The House of the Young Pioneers Georg Schwarz Children's Dance Company in Leipzig performed a work-in-progress entitled *Girls from Vietnam*. It was only when Jens held in his hands the description of Thea Mass's choreography of *Spring in Vietnam* (1969) that he began to feel amused and surprised.

At a 1971 ballet competition, Thea Mass won second place for *Spring in Vietnam*, which was originally choreographed in 1969 (Konegen 1972). At the time, Mass was the choreographer and director of the State Dance Ensemble, a folk ensemble employing semiprofessional dancers. In true St. Denis-fashion, Mass was inspired to create *Spring in Vietnam* after seeing a postage stamp depicting a “Vietnamese woman planting rice and wearing a rifle on her back” (Schurig 1972, 26). The description of the choreography was eerily reminiscent of our parodic living room choreography. Here, as in our dance, a Vietnamese woman planting rice was driven by imagined dangers to pick up her rifle and make her rounds. This simple sequence was repeated several times: planting rice, wielding the rifle, planting rice, wielding, when suddenly she is interrupted by a couple dancing a duet. The duet represents the Vietnamese woman remembering her husband as he fights on the frontlines (Konegen 1972, 37–40).

Spring in Vietnam earned official awards and accolades while reigniting an old socialist controversy regarding the relationship between content and form (Konegen 1972, 36). The content—a proclamation of solidarity with a Vietnamese brotherland successfully fighting for independence from “capitalist aggressors”—was properly aligned with GDR ideology and official state doctrine; however, reviewers praised the choreography for its formal simplicity (accessibility) while simultaneously criticizing the dance for its excessive use of pantomime and naïve folk dance devices. Such an evaluation of the work was indicative of the conflicted nature of the East German stance on art in the early 1970s. The political message had to be clear; yet, the means (form) were supposed to disguise the didacticism of socialist realism.

In truth, if Jens had not detected any similarity to our parody, it is likely he would not have paid much attention to *Spring in Vietnam*. It represented one of the many examples of political and ideological choreography found in the archive that one reads about with slight disbelief. It was easy to become sarcastic and ask oneself, “How come people didn’t see how obviously grotesque this choreography looks?” This is one of the dangers of dealing with doctrinaire material, but he was used to such thoughts and had censored himself on many occasions in order to avoid getting stuck in an unproductive analytical space. Thus, he photocopied the material and forgot about it.

Giersdorf: resigned, but then with increasing wonder and excitement

It was not until ten years later that I remembered *Spring in Vietnam* while standing in front of a video installation by the Californian performance collective called My Barbarian.¹³ I visited the recently opened New Museum in New York City in early 2008. While strolling through the museum, I was confronted by an installation called *The Golden Age*. The installation consisted of two small television monitors hanging across from each other in a small nook. On one screen three members of the performance collective danced and gesticulated a politically incorrect mixture of stereotypical movements derived from African American history. References to slave labor, chain gangs, and blackface minstrelsy were combined with newer dance moves from hip-hop and rhythm and blues. Even though one could easily identify the movement as “African,” the material did not connote anything specific. On the opposite wall, facing the first video screen, was a second one. On this second screen a group of observers appears to be watching the dancers in the first video on the opposite wall. The observers on the second screen look as if they are imitating the pantomimed choreography on the first screen, resulting in a dance reminiscent of the macarena. The slight delay in timing between the action on the two screens and the purposefully unproficient execution of the original choreography further emptied the gestures and movements in the first video of any meaning.

I called Yutian the same day to invoke our living room choreography and to express my surprise at how similar My Barbarian’s choreography was to ours. Even though both choreographies aimed at very different objectives—in our case, at the choreographic parody of postcolonial dance historiography and theory and in the case of *The Golden Age*, at a performed critique of racism and appropriation in relation to the African diaspora as well as to the market economy of artistic

production—they were similar in their utilization of choreographic abstractions of folk and everyday vocabularies. Both choreographies used the limited technical abilities of amateurs to question the meaning of vocabulary.

Inspired by the video installation, Yutian and I jokingly started to imagine which of the various incarnations of our choreography we could produce. We created hypothetical scenarios in which we reconstructed *Spring in Vietnam* for video performances, organized conferences on reconstruction, reenactment, and parody, and displayed our work at the Black and White Gallery in New York City. At some point Yutian cheerfully suggested that we apply for a grant at her university. And so we did.

Wong: with wariness

Jens called me. “They did our dance. We waited too long and someone did our dance.” I had no idea what he was referring to, and he started to describe My Barbarian’s *The Golden Age*. We should do it this time. We should apply for a grant, and I flew to New York to see the exhibition. I experienced one of those modern art philistine moments. You’ve got to be kidding, two video screens across the room from one another? We can have three: the dance, the dance critic, and the jaded academic who pulls it all together. I went home and began working on the grant.

Giersdorf: walks over to stage left

Uh-Hmmm (*clearing his throat, adjusting the glasses*)

(*Continues in a neutral voice*)

The College of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign announces a new award—The Creative Research Award. Meant to provide funds for “creative research,” the award states that preference will be given to projects that are both collaborative and international in nature.

Wong: walks to stage left, stands beside Giersdorf; neutral tone

For our application we used established academic discourses and traditional research models to offset the ironic questioning of academic structures and methods. We proposed two interdependent analyses by investigating the nationally specific creation of ethnic differences and the canonization of cultural production. The first analysis was supposed to compare the different construction of the Vietnamese freedom fighter and immigrant in both US and East German national discourse and artistic production. This analysis drew on categories across multiple contexts: the deadly Vietcong, the Asian American model minority, the freedom fighter seeking postcolonial independence in young nation states, and the former Vietnamese East German guest worker, now illegal immigrant, stranded in a reunified post-Wall Germany. In the U.S., Vietnamese subjects inhabit the oriental space of atemporal exotics, desperate refugees, and finally the acculturated immigrant who has assimilated into a multicultural milieu. GDR propaganda capitalized on its ideological relationship with socialist Vietnam, which reduced ethnic difference to a matter of cultural distinction, such that East Germany and Vietnam were different simply because one was German and the other Vietnamese. This difference was not incompatible with the desire to create a unified global revolutionary force in line with Marxist-Leninist ideology.

The subtitle of this project, “Monumentalizing the Unpopular,” directs attention toward the lesser known spectacle that dominated East German life—that of political choreography and folk dance. East German citizens were required to learn, perform, and consume folk dance as a form of indoctrination. Our project sought to understand how folk dance—which in the U.S. is misunderstood as quaint, ahistorical, and apolitical—plays a significant role in shaping history in a Foucaultian sense.

Like the socialists who viewed the staging of folk dance as a performance of a socialist future, our project sought to understand reenactment as a practice of staging the future in the present. This is in contrast to traditional practices of dance reconstruction as, at best, an interpretation of the past.

The critical restaging of *Spring in Vietnam* challenges two of the commonly used rationales for reconstructing a historical dance: (1) that a particular work demonstrates artistic merit, and (2) that a particular work serves to demonstrate exemplary “national” achievement.¹⁴ *Spring in Vietnam* fulfils neither of these purposes. The state in which the piece was created no longer exists; thus, its revival does not serve a nationalist agenda, and the aesthetics of agitprop and the genre of folk dance do not meet modernist criteria for the masterpiece. As a “folk dance,” the reconstruction does not make sense either. The work was originally performed by East Germans after training sessions with a Vietnamese consultant. After the reunification, East Germans were subsumed into the larger German population as an embarrassing hiccup in an otherwise democratic German state. To restage East German propaganda does not fall into the tradition of invoking the folk as a form of promoting ethnic or national pride. To do so would invoke *ostalgie*—that unproductive nostalgia for East German structures that comes dangerously close to uncontextualized pro-Communism (Giersdorf 2013). It is also a piece that represents the Vietnamese; however, the representation is about claiming ideological oneness—a claim not based on cultural difference, but on political unity. In the U.S., restaging the piece would not be read as an evocation of a historical political solidarity between East Germans and Vietnamese, but as a performance of yellowface. Our dance represented a disconnection between bodily memory and the state, and our project offered a choreographic meditation on this disconnection in the present.

Our proposal described a project in four stages: research, reenactment, video installation, and publication and thus did not distinguish itself from a traditional research project. We proposed to discuss the above-mentioned theoretical issues in the first stage. Part of this investigation would be interviews with East German dancers and choreographers and archival research. The outcomes of this first stage would then be utilized toward a critical reenactment, which meant that we would reconstruct *Spring in Vietnam* and then provide this material to two choreographers—one in the U.S. and one in Germany—for a critical engagement. The reenactment and the two choreographies were supposed to provide the material for the video installation, in which the audience would be confronted simultaneously with all three dances without any differentiation between original or historical material and contemporary rethinking. Thus, the three screens would serve as an illustration of the often contrary aesthetic, economic, and political interests between artists, archivists, and critics. This stage of the project also attempted to raise questions regarding the documentation of history and documentation as art and would at the same time point to the act of a reconstruction of an unpopular, noncanonical dance as a political act. The final publication was supposed to investigate the relationship between theory and practice in historiography through our experience with this project.

Giersdorf: both mockingly and in a self-deprecating tone of voice while walking back to center stage

The whole project was, of course, grotesque in its complexity and scope, which in turn posed a critique of similar hegemonic projects, which often display discrepancies between proposal and possible execution. The grant we applied for was meant to provide seed money to support further applications for larger grants. Thus, there was no danger of us having to actually deliver the whole proposed project. So, you can imagine our surprise when we received a large portion of the grant. Our alternative historical project—starting with a parody of choreographed theorization in our living room, extending into archival records of the choreographed East German propaganda, resulting in an ironic telephone dialogue engaged with an artistic production at the New Museum, ending with a traditional research project with a possible future execution—had now received validation as official historiography. Of course, there was the possibility that the grant panel also deemed our project ridiculous and that they turned the joke around by awarding us the grant.

We received \$5,000. Now we actually had to do some of the project. More important, we now owned a scholarly object to be scrutinized from our different theoretical positions.

Wong: pauses and walks to stage right before continuing in a lower more intimate voice

A word about recollections.

You may have noticed some differences in our recollections. How things actually happened? When exactly they happened? But from here on out we agree more as things are written down and our memories become institutionalized into an academic project. How do we discipline what began as joking into a legitimate project? And while doing it, how do we still keep the joke alive as a methodological strategy? The project in the form of a “joke” served a number of purposes. The seeming dissonance of revolutionary East German Vietnamese folk dance proved useful for late-night discussions on the limits of 1990s U.S. identity politics and the absence of race in predominantly aesthetic and philosophical discourses in German dance studies. The choreography of our joke spoke to the politics of stereotype and representation and to choreography itself. This led to more jokes about the field’s discursive love affair with presence and corporeality. In other words, our “joke” functioned as a repository of intellectual excess. In our grant proposal the project could not sound excessive, and so it took on the contours of a clearly defined set of questions. Using established academic discourse and traditional research models to offset the ironic questioning of academic structures and methods, our grant renarrated fragments into a whole and recast joke into serious business. Our “joke” became objectified and was thus made real.

This essay uses parody, nonchronology, and gossip, which Foucault describes as necessary methods, for a new effective historiography. Parody works in his understanding against the seemingly real and reveals universality, objectivity, essence, facts, and the permanence of the past (Foucault 1984, 91). Our parodic living room choreography functioned in this framework by questioning the authenticity of the Other, non-Western, and marginal subjectivity in Western academic discourse. In other words, Gayatri Spivak’s subaltern person had already spoken at that point and become part of the historical metanarrative. We attempted to provide our parody as an alternative to established methodologies. Such a parodic stance touched every stage of our larger project. It did not just incorporate marginality into the existing discourse, but consistently utilized such marginality as a destabilizing and mobilizing force.

The conscious nonchronology supported the destabilization of established historiography by erasing causality and temporality as interdependent structural principles. We did not research, reenact, choreograph, and write, before publishing; that would have been the common flow of historiography. Instead we followed coincidences. We did not cover up such accidents and mistakes in the Foucaultian sense, but kept them visible as a structure—a chronology of irreconcilable discrepancies (Foucault 1984, 91). Unlike Foucault, we did not empower bodies with only symptomatic reactions to history nor did we conceive of the body as a corporeal surface that indicates decay.

Wong: rejoins Giersdorf center stage

Giersdorf:

There are several important questions to ask and issues to raise in relation to this alternative dance study. The first is, of course, our own position of not only having to navigate disciplinary discourses outside of Dance Studies with our individual research on Asian American studies and East Germany studies, but the combination of these two projects within the intersection of a Vietnamese dance. Opening up Dance Studies to radically different investigations and methodologies reveals the incongruities and constructedness of what dance is, how it is made, remade, historicized, and studied. When we presented this project as a lecture, one colleague recommended that we look at

Christina Schwenkel's work on the representation of the Vietnamese revolutionary in the Vietnamese media (Schwenkel 2009, 2012, 2013). This made us realize that we had not been sufficiently clear in our intentions, and our reflections could still be understood as situated—and, most important, insufficiently executed—in an identity-driven U.S. academic discourse where the object of research is given voice, authenticity, and agency through empirical and methodological efforts and accuracy on the part of the investigator. We hope now that we are sufficiently clear, and that there is no *there there*, only different understandings and choreographies of it.

At the same time the project also asks what dance is and how we inquire into dance and its potential for a broader understanding of social structures. This became clear when another scholar asked us about the efficacy or the limits of parody. What happens when one reaches the end of a chain of associations? What then is the end result?

Concluding Remarks

Parody is what allows us to reveal the trajectories of the different discourses; yet, the assumption is that parody keeps our project away from a one-dimensional materialization of the dance and dance discourse. Our project never becomes a dance, and it never becomes an object of Dance Studies. It is not attached to singular subjectivity, and it does not get remade or re-presented. It is not academically viable, and it is not universal enough to serve as a vehicle for abstracted theorization toward action. What we propose instead is a methodological aesthetic that produces an onto-historical continuum that is affirmative in its potentiality, yet refuses to fulfill reductive disciplinary expectations. With this tactic, we are addressing what Martin saw as a problem that alludes to “the crisis of theory and politics” (1998, 212). At the end of *Critical Moves* (1998) Martin highlighted the contribution that choreography and dancing with their “amalgamation of structure and agency” can bring to the endeavor of what he labels “critical multiculturalism” (212), which we are evoking with our project. Martin states: “One of the predicaments of a radical multicultural politics is how to evaluate the efficacy of its own capacities for mobilization, when it is invited to recognize itself in the arrested motion of resources targeted for a fixed position” (1998, 212).

Thus, by the end of our process, the parody is no longer a parody and becomes an allegory of the perilous labor and the politics involved in bringing dance scholarship into being. As we approach this stage of the process—publication and its attendant permanence—the project, yet not the choreographies, becomes solidified as part of the public discourse in our field.

Perhaps this is the home that Martin referred to that dance studies provides to all of those problems—those homeless ideas—that fall out of other disciplines (1998, 181). The dance exists in a corporeal past and exists in the present as theory. In consequence, it can be remobilized for the future.

Notes

1. Susan Foster (1995, 1996), Mark Franko (1995), Randy Martin (1998), Marta Savigliano (1995), Susan Manning (1993), Ann Cooper-Albright (1997), and Janet Adshead-Lansdale (1994) are among these first scholars.

2. See Brenda Dixon Gottschild (1998), Susan Manning (1993), Ann Daly (1995), Ramsay Burt (1995), Linda Tomko (2000), and Sally Ann Ness (1992).

3. See Ann Cooper Albright (1997), Vida Midgelow (2007), Philipa Rothfield (2010), and Randy Martin (1998). See also the special issue of *DRJ* 43.2 on the development of dance and phenomenology.

4. See Peggy Phelan (1993), André Lepecki (2006), Gabriele Brandstetter (1995), Gabriele Klein (1994), Gerald Siegmund (2006), Andrew Hewitt (2005), and Mark Franko (1995, 2002).

5. See specifically chapter 8 of Martin's (2011) assessment of administrative labor in the academy.
6. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), Edward W. Said (1979), Aijaz Ahmad (1988), Arjun Appadurai (1994), and Jean Franco (1988).
7. These research projects became Yutian Wong (2010) and Jens Richard Giersdorf (2013).
8. Brenda Dixon Gottschild identifies five characteristics of African derived dance forms (1998).
9. "Socialist brotherland" (*sozialistisches Bruderland*) is the term used in East Germany to describe other countries that defined themselves as socialist. Because that self-definition changed over time, the countries labeled as socialist brotherland also changed.
10. The GDR ran educational programs for Vietnamese textile workers as part of so-called international solidarity. In reality Vietnamese workers were used to make up for labor shortages in East German factories, and the immigration status of the Vietnamese was not much different from that of Turkish and Greek guest workers in West Germany. The unification treaty between GDR and FRG decreed the deportation of all Vietnamese laborers who had lived less than eight years in the GDR, but it also called for humanitarian solutions in specific cases. In 1989 there were almost 60,000 Vietnamese guest workers in the GDR. More than half took the offer from the reunified German government of 3,000 deutschmarks and a flight to Vietnam. Many of the remaining Vietnamese workers appealed to the reunified German government for political asylum, and more than 90 percent of the requests were denied. The reunified German government gave the former guest workers temporary status to remain in Germany until their legal status could be determined, resulting in an immigration limbo (Will 2002; Deutscher Bundestag 1990; Cowell 1995).
11. Beginning in 1986, California's English-only referendum initiated the passage of Proposition 187, in which California residents would be required to prove their legal status before receiving social services such as health care and public education. On its tails followed the passages of Proposition 184, California's notorious three-strikes law that gives mandatory life sentences to anyone charged with a third felony (shoplifting counts as a felony); Proposition 209, which banned race-based affirmative action in state-run institutions; and finally Proposition 227, which banned bilingual education in California public schools (Ono and Sloop 2002).
12. See Chiang (2009) for an account of the institutionalization of ethnic studies.
13. My Barbarian is a performance collective from Los Angeles that engages critically with intercultural miss-happenings in its performances and video installations. (<http://www.mybarbarian.com>, September 26, 2008). Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon, and Alexandro Segade founded the group in 2000.
14. See, for instance, the rationale and description for the National Endowments of the Arts' American Masterpiece Grant, <http://www.nea.gov/national/masterpieces/about.html>, accessed on July 5, 2013:

American Masterpieces Dance grants fall under three categories: support for the reconstruction and restoration of masterpieces for inclusion in a company's active repertory; support for dance companies to tour masterpieces; and opportunities to make these masterpieces available to students in undergraduate dance programs, enabling them to perform dances from the nation's greatest choreographers. Dance grants were awarded in FY 2007 through FY 2010.

Projects funded include an FY 2009 grant to the Nikolais/Louis Foundation for Dance to support the reconstruction of dances from Alwin Nikolais's 1956 ballet *Kaleidoscope* on the Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company. In FY 2010, the University of Hawaii at Manoa received an American Masterpieces grant to support the restaging of Murray Louis's *Porcelain Dialogues* (1974) for its dance students. The project included documentation, master classes, lectures, and lecture/demonstrations at community institutions.

Works Cited

- Adshead-Landsdale, Janet, and June Layson, eds. 1994. *Dance History: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Ahmad, Aijaz. 1992. *In Theory; Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Albright, Ann Cooper. 1997. *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1994. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, 324–39. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Brandstetter, Gabriele. 1995. *Tanz-Lektüren: Körperbilder und Raumfiguren der Avantgarde*. Berlin: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag.
- Burt, Ramsay. 1995. *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacles, and Sexuality*. London: Routledge.
- Chiang, Mark. 2009. *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies: Autonomy and Representation in the University*. New York: New York University Press.
- Cowell, Alan. 1995. "The Vietnamese in Germany: No Job, No County." *New York Times*, October 13. <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/10/13/world/the-vietnamese-in-germany-no-jobs-no-country.html>.
- Daly, Ann. 1995. *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Dance Research Journal*. 2011. Vol. 43, no.2.
- Deutscher Bundestag. 1990. "Antwort der Bundesregierung auf die Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten Frau Trenez und der Fraktion DIE GRÜNEN/Bündnis 90." 1. Drucksache 11/8433.
- Foster, Susan Leigh, ed. 1995. *Choreographing History*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- , ed. 1996. *Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, Culture, Power*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, Michel. 1984. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 76–100. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Franco, Jean. 1988. "Beyond Ethnocentrism: Gender, Power, and the Third-World Intelligentsia." *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 503–18. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Franko, Mark. 1995. *Dancing Modernism/ Performing Politics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- . 2002. *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- Giersdorf, Jens Richard. 2009. "Dance Studies in the International Academy." *Dance Research Journal* 41 (1): 23–44.
- . 2013. *The Body of the People: East German Dance since 1945*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Gottschild, Brenda Dixon. 1998. *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*. Westport: Praeger Publishers.
- Hewitt, Andrew. 2005. *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Life*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Klein, Gabriele. 1994. *FrauenKörperTanz: Eine Zivilisationsgeschichte des Tanzes*. Munich: Heyne Verlag.
- Konegen, Helga. 1972. "Analytische Betrachtungen zu 'Frühling in Vietnam.'" *Material zum Theater* 8 (1): 35–43.
- Lepecki, André. 2006. *Exhausting Dance: Performance and Politics of Movement*. London: Routledge.
- Manning, Susan. 1993. *Ecstasy and the Demon: The Dances of Mary Wigman*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Martin, Randy. 1995. "Moving Bodies/Making Politics." Syllabus. University of California, Riverside.

- . 1998. “For Dance Studies.” In his *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*, 181–218. Durham: Duke University Press.
- . 2011. *Under New Management: Universities, Administrative Labor, and the Professional Turn*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Midgellow, Vida. 2007. *Reworking the Ballet: Counter Narratives and Alternative Bodies*. London: Routledge.
- Ness, Sally Ann. 1992. *Body, Movement, and Culture: Kinesthetic and Visual Symbolism in a Philippine Community*. City: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Ono, Kent, and John Sloop. 2002. *Shifting Borders: Rhetoric, Immigration, and California’s Proposition 187*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Phelan, Peggy. 1993. *Unmarked*. London: Routledge.
- Ridlan, Hans-Peter. 1967. “Kunst ist Waffe!” *Festschrift Rudolstadt*. Leipzig: Zentralhaus für Kulturarbeit der DDR, 17–18.
- Rothfield, Philipa. 2010. “Differentiating Phenomenology and Dance.” In *Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, edited by Jens Giersdorf, Yutian Wong, and Janet O’Shea, 303–18. London: Routledge.
- Said, Edward W. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Routledge.
- Savigliano, Marta. 1995. *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*. City: Westview Press.
- Schurig, Gudrun. 1972. “‘Frühling in Vietnam’: Kunst und Politik im Prozess des Gestaltens.” *Material zum Theater* 20 (3): 26–31.
- Schwenkel, Christina. 2009. *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- . 2012. “Civilizing the City: Socialist Ruins and Urban Renewal in Central Vietnam.” *asia critique* 20 (2): 379–401.
- . 2013. “Post/Socialist Affect: Ruination and Reconstruction of the Nation in Urban Vietnam.” *Cultural Anthropology* 28 (2): 252–77.
- Siegmund, Gerald. 2006. *Abwesenheit: Eine performative Ästhetik des Tanzes*. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Tomko, Linda. 2000. *Dancing Class: Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Divides in American Dance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Will, Gerhard. 2002. “Chancen und Risiken deutscher Politik in Vietnam.” *SWP-Studie*. Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit.
- Wong, Yutian. 2010. *Choreographing Asian America*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.