# Post-Salvagism: Choreography and Its Discontents in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

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## Introduction

While researching dance within the Occupied Palestinian Territories, comments made by the choreographers of local performance troupes resonated in my mind because they exemplify how foreign hegemony controls notions of modernity. The first was a lament: "But can't they understand that this is our contemporary dance?" It followed the rejection of the group's application to a European contemporary dance festival, on the basis that their dance production was not contemporary enough and that it would be better suited to a folkloric festival. For those engaged in creative innovation in dance, this rebuke can feel like being sent to a home for the elderly: packed off to a place where everybody dances in circles, reminiscing about the glorious golden past of their own particular civilization. The second comment cropped up in numerous conversations with local dance practitioners and audiences: "I don't like the modern dance." This comment was generally directed at any foreign or local dance production that did not fit within nostalgically imagined impressions of dance in times gone by.

These two comments illustrate a particular problem for local cultural innovation. Being denied the label "contemporary" can feel like being denied a collective cultural visa to the twenty-first century; rejecting the term "modern" can appear to be an obstinate yet doomed refusal to accept the passage of time. Together they reinforce a sense that colonized and politically marginalized populations are bound to "either resist or yield to the new but cannot produce it" (Clifford 1987, 122). Such a paradigm can be a major dilemma for dance groups that are innovatively building upon their cultural heritage in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and elsewhere.

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Do popular cultural classifications such as traditional, modern, postmodern, postcolonial, and contemporary conceal more than they describe? How might evolving dance disciplines from diverse corners of the world be more clearly recognized without them? These questions are gaining an increasing urgency for dance artists creating new works on the fringes of globalization. As a result of global flows of people and media, local movements toward modernity are increasingly less isolated within national boundaries and identities (Hall 1992; Appadurai 1996). Cultural modernity may be seen as a global phenomenon. As a result of aggressive cultural hegemony, however, these flows of people and media can also be seen as leading toward a global homogenizing of ideals of modernity. In the context of economically and politically disempowered populations, such flows can marginalize alternative forms of modernity.

The dilemma may at first seem to be simply a misunderstanding of labels: stiff interpretations of the words "modern" and "contemporary" in a global culture that has come to recognize more fluid understandings of modernity. The misunderstanding can, however, also be read as an indicator of a deeper problem, one in which culture, history, and ideology are imposed through an often-insidious process of foreign hegemony (Fanon 1963/1986; Freire 1972). From such a perspective, the cultural ideals of politically marginalized groups are degraded until they conform to dominant colonial notions of modernity—ultimately a whittling down of global cultural diversity beneath the façade of cultural globalization. Thus, resolving this dilemma can require deeper investigations into what "modernity" and "contemporary" might actually mean in different cultural contexts.

In addressing such a problem, this article reflects upon the evolution of dance as a performed art amongst the indigenous population of Palestine during the past two hundred years.[1] From within this history, the philosophic intent of certain local dance productions can be distinguished from common cultural labels such as traditionalist, modernist, postmodernist, contemporary, and postcolonial. In order to clarify this particular philosophic thread, I introduce the terms "salvagism" and "post-salvagism." These terms might subsequently assist other cultural activists, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and beyond, who feel similarly caught in the semantic vortex that inexorably pulls innovative cultural activity away from the local and toward the imperial.

## Dance and Evolution

Before discussing the evolution of dance as a performed art in Palestine, it is important to clarify what is meant by the terms "dance" and "evolution." The use of categorical terms such as "art" within cultural research can foster conflicting meanings and inhibit more concise discourse (Blacking 1973; Booth and Kuhn 1990; Nahachewsky 1995; Crowther 2004). Moreover, positioning *dance* as an art form within any given cultural group is a contentious endeavor as various functions, values, and meanings can be attributed to the physical activities generically referred to in English as a "dance" or "dancing" (Kealiinohomoku 1970; Hanna 1979; Hart 1991; Williams 1991; Kaeppler 1993, 2000; Fraleigh 1999; Dils and Cooper Albright 2001). Amongst the indigenous population of Palestine, there are several Arabic terms utilized to describe patterned movement activities, including

*dabkeh, raqsa,* and *nuwah.* While each describes a particular moment of physical expression, with varying connotations and social meanings, there is no specific term used in the community that distinguishes any particular local dance form as artistic. A specific intention to present dance "in the seeing place" (Fraleigh 1999, 6) during the last two centuries has, however, meant that ideals related to creative physical expression have built a local history of artistic theory (Rowe 2007, 2008). This history of artistic theory correlates with contemporary Western notions of "art" as a product of such theoretical histories (see, for example, Danto 1964, 1997; Dickie 1969, 1974). It is possible, therefore, to trace a local history of artistic thought in dance that is not necessarily determined by foreign/colonial artistic ideals.

Discussing dance, or culture in general, as an *evolutionary* phenomenon is similarly problematic. The social sciences have generally presented strong arguments against the notion of evolution in culture, mostly over concerns of biological reductionism and right-wing idealism (Dunbar, Knight and Power 1999). This can be attributed to the way Western literature on culture (particularly on dance) has mostly conceptualized evolution from a unilinear, ethnocentric perspective. Searching for the origins of dance, several major texts have speculated on a particular progression of dance that culminates in the contemporary Western dance scene. This progression generally traces a path from animal displays to animalistic rites to folk dances, finally ascending to theatrical ballet and contemporary Western dance techniques (for example, Grove 1895; Harrison 1913; Sachs 1937; Rust 1969; Lange 1976; Lonsdale 1981). This approach has been extensively criticized for its ethnocentricity (see, for example, Kealiinohomoku 1970; Youngerman 1974; Williams 1976, 1995; Kaeppler 1978; Farnell 1995; Grau 1998; Buckland 1999), although this criticism has often fused the narrow concept of unilinear progression (the ethnocentric belief in one superior/inevitable evolutionary pathway) with the larger concept of evolution. In dismissing the former these critics have generally disregarded the latter.

By avoiding culture-centric notions of one inevitable evolutionary pathway, all cultural systems can be seen evolving, albeit in different directions (Barnard 2000). In this sense, evolution can be conceived as a value-neutral process—that is, as simply the recognition of change continually occurring over time. By acknowledging that such changes occur in response to other shifts in the wider natural and social environment, a naturalistic conception of evolution actually challenges the idea that a singular divine, supernatural, or super-cultural power determines cultural values and ultimately directs cultural actions toward or away from particular ideas (Dawkins 1976; Said 1983).

Why is such recognition of cultural evolution important? It is perhaps the best way of rebutting the spurious proposition that some cultures are inherently static and non-evolving.[2] While perhaps an academic quibble, this proposition has had far-reaching consequences on the ground in many parts of the world. The belief that some cultural systems are more dynamic and thus more "advanced" than others has lead to the idea that "primitive" cultural systems need to catch up with the rest. This in turn has resulted in politically sponsored "development" programs across the globe (Sachs 1992; Escobar 1995; Crush 1995). Within the field of cultural education, such programs all too often involve the ignoring, devaluing, and unwitting obliteration of the existing methods of cultural

education in politically marginalized communities (Fanon 1963/1986; Freire 1972; Said 1993). As a result, such "cultural development" often results in deculturation: the bullying replacement of one culture by another (Ortiz 1940/1995).

Working as a dance practitioner within various politically marginalized communities around the world, I have often borne witness to the sad results of this development paradigm. Well-intentioned foreign cultural education projects often become a tragic/farcical process: a benevolent dance teacher comes to show people how to dance, what to dance, and where to dance in an effort to stimulate what appears to be a stagnant cultural environment. The local culture becomes increasingly dependent upon such foreign interventions to support and refine the imposed aesthetic ideals and thus less autonomous in their own cultural actions. Being too often involved in such sponsored projects as a dance practitioner has bred within me an urgent desire to investigate and reveal not just the dignified existence of localized dance cultures but also the inherently evolving nature of such cultural systems. Perhaps if the *evolution* of such dance cultures is made more apparent, more dance interventions might be designed to support, rather than diminish, locally evolving cultural knowledge and aesthetic autonomy.

Revealing the localized evolution of a dance culture can be difficult, however, when such evolution is gauged by culturally specific criteria such as aesthetic principles. Varied attempts to define universal signifiers within the evolution of dance have generally been very culture-specific (see, for example, Goodman 1968; Margolis 1981; Giurchescu 1986; McFee 1992). Changes that may seem very important to some may be insignificant to others, depending on the cultural distance between those making such observations (Cohen 1982; Kaeppler 1989; Sklar 2001; Rubidge 2002). Thus, determining a dance culture's evolution through specific evolutionary dance signifiers can be as prone to ethnocentric bias as determining the complexity of an oral storytelling culture through comparison with the works of Ernest Hemingway.

Although universal *signifiers* of evolution in dance are inevitably subject to cultural prejudice, the actual *processes* of evolution in dance might still be described and observed. Supporting such observation, Richard Dawkins's (1976) meme theory posits that cultural change is analogous to biological change, as the evolution of both cultural ideas (memes) and biological genes relies upon accurate reproduction with random adaptations, which are ultimately subject to selection from the cultural environment (for memes) or the natural environment (for genes).[3] This process of copying, changing, and selecting changes is an evolutionary algorithm that has been used to reveal the way cultural change occurs and is sustained (Dennet 1995; Blackmore 1999). Academically examined through the *Journal of Memetics,* meme theory has been used to explore cultural fields as diverse as architecture, music, linguistics, suicide, taboos, financial markets, and even chess moves. Little attention, however, has been afforded to meme theory within dance research. In considering how it might be applied, I propose that the three evolutionary processes of reproduction, adaptation, and selection might be considered as dance learning, dance creating, and dance evaluating.

The way dances are learned, created, and evaluated varies widely in differing social contexts, and so preliminary research requires identifying local methods and interpreta-

tions of these evolutionary stages. Subsequently, observing these three processes in unison can render the evolution of a dance culture more clearly discernable, as opposed to just taking a cultural snapshot that freezes heritage at a certain point in time. Although the confines of this article do not allow for greater elaboration on the methods of evolutionary research in dance,[4] it is worth noting the sociopolitical significance of such research. This rendering of an evolutionary process can reveal how artistic shifts occur *within* a cultural group rather than as merely a consequence of diffusion through contact with foreign cultural forms. In doing so, evolutionary research can provide a strong argument against developmental theories that posit certain societies as "more advanced" through the overt appearance of changes in their cultural history. The data collected through evolutionary studies can also highlight a wider range of potential futures for communities feeling split between a local past and a foreign modernity.

As a result of such evolutionary research, my investigations into dance in the Occupied Palestinian Territories revealed what I describe here as a post-salvagist approach to dance production. In order to more clearly reveal this distinct evolutionary path, it is useful to briefly review a history of dance as a performed art in Palestine during the past two centuries.

## A Historical Overview of Indigenous Dance Performances in Palestine

Prior to the early nineteenth century, literary references to dance in Palestine[5] are very scarce. Dance is mentioned only a handful of times in the biblical and apocryphal writings (see Spoer 1906; Murray 1955; Van Unnik 1964), and various impressions of more ancient dance practices might be gleaned from images and cuneiform inscribed in clay (see Lapp 1989; Biran 2003; Rowe 2007). Similarly, pre-twentieth-century Arabic literature provides little detail and only a few allusions to dance practices in Palestine specifically. My research suggests that it is not until the nineteenth century that more detailed accounts of local dance practices become documented in text through literature produced by European travelers to the region.

Despite this sparseness of documentation, there have been some rather spectacular claims regarding the history of dance practices in Palestine. These have mostly involved politicized attempts to link either an ancient Jewish or ancient Canaanite cultural origin to local dances as an affirmation of differing nationalist heritages. Such claims generally deny both the sophisticated diversity of dance practices existing in ancient times and millennia of subsequent cultural diffusion and innovation through Assyrian, Persian, Roman, Byzantine, Islamic Arab, European Crusader, Egyptian Marmeluke, and Turkish Ottoman presence in the region. Given this diversity of cultural groups passing through Palestine over the centuries, suppositions of unadulterated connections to ancient cultural origins seem to reveal more about contemporary ideologies than historic actualities.

While local dance heritage may arguably contain influences from much earlier times, such influences might be exceedingly marginal and indistinguishable from more recent trends. Such suppositions on the ancient origins of Palestinian culture can be traced to the textual accounts of European biblical tourists, a massive body of literature that

flourished from the mid-nineteenth century onwards (see Mitchell 1887). Imaginatively reliving religious journeys through the archeological remains of the Holy Land, these Orientalists[6] tended to perceive the local indigenous populations as lost animals scurrying through the shadows of an abandoned fairground. Nineteenth-century Palestinian culture was generally surmised as a decaying remnant of a much more glorious biblical past, perpetually niggling at the historical fantasies of European tourists. Henry Baker Tristram illustrates this disillusioned contempt, following a performance of a "native dance" near Jericho:

> I never saw such vacant, sensual, and debased features in any group of human beings of the type and form of whites. There was no trace of mind in the expression of any one of these poor creatures, who scarcely know they have a soul and have not an idea beyond the day . . . we felt, as we looked after them, that if there is one thing more trying than to witness pain which one cannot alleviate, it is to behold degradation which one cannot elevate. And this, too, on the very spot where the Redeemer had taught and healed. (1865, 209–10)

The descriptions of such dances by Tristram, Charles Dudley Warner (1877), and other European/American tourists nevertheless provide some details on the local dance practices of the time, revealing dances not just associated with weddings and celebrations but also in mourning and religious worship. Most notably they reveal that an early entertainment industry had evolved in response to the growing number of tourists, presenting dance outside its social context and within a second existence as a representation of local culture (Hoerburger 1968).

These performances were subsequently documented by what might be considered salvage anthropologists (for example, Spoer 1905 1906, 1910; Baldensperger 1913; Al Aref 1944), who perceived native cultures as static and thus in urgent need of recording before the seemingly destructive onslaught of foreign interaction (Clifford 1987). Academically surmising that local culture had been immobile for centuries, they described local dances as though they were the living reflection of an ancient biblical culture.

This introduced what I call a salvagist cultural movement within local cultural identity in the early twentieth century, as differing nationalist groups sought to pin their claim on the land through proclamations of ancient cultural connections. For colonizing Zionists from Europe (who would eventually establish the state of Israel in the region), this involved the appropriation of indigenous folk dances such as *dabkeh* through their revival as "traditional" Israeli dances (Ingber 1974; Kaschl 2003; Rowe 2007). For pan-Arabists, this involved constructing a historic impression of the stamping celebratory dabkeh line that was homogenous with the wider region (Rowe 2007). Subsequently for Palestinian nationalists, this involved taking this specifically rural peasant dabkeh and moving it across class and social boundaries into a wider national consciousness (Taraki 1991; Kaschl 2003).

Each of these revival movements was salvagist because, in order to gain political legitimacy, they emphasized that the local dance traditions were unchanged cultural relics from ancient times. *By "inventing traditions" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), salvagism*

*inevitably froze the evolutionary process, as cultural changes could only be legitimized by an imagined ancestral society that had ceased to exist.*[7] Within Israeli folk dance, this salvagist emphasis soon shifted, particularly with the introduction of Yemenite influences in the early 1950s and the desire to create a more cosmopolitan cultural identity that would embrace Jews from across the world (Kaufman 1951; Kadman 1952, 1960, 1975).

Among the nearly one million indigenous refugees that were expelled from Israel in 1948 and 1967,[8] however, the salvagist ideal was an important way of remaining culturally tied to a land that they longed to return to but were politically excluded from. Gathering momentum in the late 1960s and 1970s with Israel's expansion and military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the Palestinian national salvagist dance movement was mostly based in the central West Bank. Emphasizing the notion of *sumud* (steadfast resistance against the colonial occupier) and *asala* (purity and fidelity to the cultural origin), folk dance festivals and competitions were held, literature produced, and dance companies formed (Kanaana 1994). Salvagism thus promoted a counter-hegemonic subculture (Gramsci 1946/1985), with folkdance challenging a colonial narrative that sought to deny an indigenous cultural identity.

While this notion of *asala* attempted to define an ancient and unchanging dance heritage, the folkloric nationalist literature on local dance history (for example, Alqam 1977; Al-Awwad 1983; Abu Hadba 1994; Barghouthi 1994) seems to contrast markedly with the observations actually documented in the nineteenth century. Many of the supposedly eternal ideals in local dance practices would appear to have arisen since the end of the nineteenth century. The arrival of the Islamic *Salafya* (Reform) movement in Palestine (from Egypt and the Arabian peninsular) during the twentieth century had already had a considerable impact on these nineteenth-century dance practices, particularly diminishing the participation of women in public exhibitions. The devastating impact of the *Nakba,* or indigenous refugee crisis of 1948, similarly dislocated cultural practices from the social environments that had sustained them. Therefore, the attempts of the folkloric nationalists to define and resurrect a singular cultural ideal in what had previously been a very diverse and pluralistic society became increasingly nonsensical. As such, the salvagist movement began to buckle under the weight of its own aspirations to historic purity.

In the central West Bank this led to the production of dance pieces that reflected a more pluralistic understanding of local culture, in which multiple interpretations of historic and contemporary identity began to surface. These challenges to salvagism, undertaken mostly by dance performers who were themselves continuing to participate in these dances in their social context, re-instigated the localized process of cultural evolution. New steps were invented, new impressions of local heritage were examined, and the political organization of the dance and function of women within it was reviewed. During a period of relative cultural isolation under the strictures of an Israeli military occupation, this shift can be most notably seen in the works of the El-Funoun Popular Dance Troupe. Early productions such as *Folkloric Scenes* (1982) and *Valley of Apples* (1984) adapted dance steps, challenged patriarchal suppositions of a male dance leader (or *lawih*) in the circling lines, and re-established female dancers within the dance formations as equal participants. Informants to my research suggested that these changes were not

undertaken as a deliberate political argument but emerged more simply as a reflection of the actual social dynamics existing in the group. Subsequent El-Funoun productions such as *Mishal* (1986) and *The Plains of Ibn Amer* (1989), along with *Jubeineh* (1992) by the Sareyyet Ramallah Troupe, saw further choreographic adaptation as a result of the more complex narratives being told by the dance itself (rather than accompanying songs or narration). These narratives, based on themes of political resistance to colonial oppression, involved creating new expressionistic movements and investing existing dance steps with new meanings: stomps became stamps of defiance, and hops became leaps of emancipation through innovative expressive gestures of the torso, arms, and head.

These dance productions came to reflect an exiled and occupied society that was not trying to reconstruct an imagined past but instead to maintain a contemporary relevance for its varied cultural legacy. Central to this aim was the maintenance of local social cohesion in the face of external attempts to dissemble the population. As an artistic ideal, they provided a philosophical direction for many of the dance pieces that continue to be produced in the West Bank in the twenty-first century, such as Sareyyet Ramallah's study of life under military occupation, *At the Checkpoint* (2005), and El-Funoun's tribute to political cartoonist Naji Al-Ali, *A Letter To* . . . (2007). Despite an influx of cross-cultural influences through international dance exchanges since the 1990s (a result of the Oslo Peace Process and a slight lift in Israeli military restrictions on travel), a resistance to foreign cultural hegemony and a desire for local cultural autonomy has remained prominent within much of the dance art produced. While the ancient past is not the setting for these dance works, they continue to merge local cultural heritage (rather than global dance trends) with the local contemporary experience as a basis for local aesthetics. The rationale behind this is explained by Sareyyet Ramallah choreographer Lina Harami:

> dance is not really a universal language. It has universal tools, in your body, your mouth, your hands, your eyes, your feet, your stomach. But the language is not the same, because there are gestures that in some country mean a totally different thing in another country. . . . In order to create your own [dance] language, you really need to explore your own language *and* other people's language so you can really see what is necessary.[9]

It might be further argued that this desire for cultural autonomy extends beyond simply a movement vocabulary, or even a set of aesthetic principles. The use of dance to foster local social cohesion and promote a current collective identity based on a collective past indicates a very distinct *philosophical* intent for artistic production. Unfortunately, this distinct philosophic intent can become lost inside the binary reasoning that attempts to extract modernity from tradition.

## A Problem of Identification

How might this distinct philosophical intent be described so that its complex history is apparent? Recognizing this sense of local autonomy in the evolving dance practices of the Occupied Palestinian Territories has been particularly impeded by the actual terms

used to describe the dances that followed salvagism. There have been local attempts to promote references to a "Palestinian modern" and a "Palestinian contemporary" dance movement, in order to create some distance from the traditionalist/salvagist category of "Palestinian folk" dance and highlight the evolutionary process (for example, Barghouti 2004a, 2004b). The use of such foreign terminology does not necessarily empower these dance products, however; instead, it can limit the ability of foreign and local viewers to interpret their power (Traugott 1992). Modern dance directly translates into Arabic as *raqsa hadith*. My informants contended that there is a strong understanding that the term "modern" in the Occupied Palestinian Territories connotes "Western," suggesting that even locally created innovations with no basis in Western dance techniques are products of Western influence. As such, *raqsa hadith* is not just a display of imagination, an adaptation of traditional ideas, or even a product of equitable transcultural exchange. Given the region's history and contemporary experiences with colonial powers, *raqsa hadith* can carry strong imperial overtones and even suggestions of latent oppression—a sort of denial of the value of the indigenous heritage. Dances considered to be *raqsa hadith*, therefore, have often faced strong opposition in the local community, as they appear to threaten, rather than extend, local cultural practices and social values.

The local desire to be innovative and evolve dance beyond the freezing process of salvagism is thus impeded by cultural labels that seem to serve foreign hegemony and disempower local influence in the cultural decision-making process. This has led to an uncertainty of direction that is lamented by many dance activists in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (Abu Hashhash 2006). Thus, the local acceptance of cultural evolution beyond salvagism, and the clarity of purpose that this process demands, can require terminology that acknowledges local autonomy while promoting local creativity.

What should this terminology be? Cultural modernity, or a "mode of relating to a contemporary reality" (Foucault 1994, 309) is often acknowledged through several rather ambiguous, temporal terms, including modernist, postmodernist, contemporary, and postcolonial. They are ambiguous terms because, as I will discuss, there are often contradictions within their common meanings and little consensus on their academic meanings. While these terms may generally describe certain cultural actions in politically marginalized communities, confusion over their potential meanings can lead to oversimplifications of artistic intent. This in turn can result in the obscuring of more diverse ideals driving innovative cultural action and defining local conceptions of modernity. In order to more clearly reveal the actual diversity in cultural evolution, a clarification of the artistic meaning of these terms is first required. It may then be decided whether or not they adequately describe all innovative cultural activity within politically marginalized communities.

## The Specificity of Modernist

Arguing that "modernist" does not merely mean the most recent, Danto (1997) posits modernism, in art and philosophy, as a notion of strategy, style, and agenda. Preceded by a rapid growth in European empires that resulted in European global hegemony in the nineteenth century, modernism brought a cultural relativity and subjectivity to academic



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and artistic ideals. Rejecting the existing empiricism, positivism, objectivism, and cultural absolutism of the Victorian era, "modernism" as a cultural intent came to be defined as a rebellion against historic paradigms (Greenburg 1989). This fostered a sense of aesthetic autonomy, liberating artistic practices from particular mythical or religious philosophies (Foster et al. 2004). Such autonomy gave rise to subsequent manifestos, each rebelling against its predecessor and more firmly entrenching the process of rebellion, as each sought to redefine truth in art (Carroll 1988; Danto 1997). This puts modernism in a very specific cultural and historical context, distinguishing it from the general notion of modernity as a socioeconomic idea (Schulte-Sasse 1986).

As a process of mimesis in the visual arts during the Renaissance period shifted to a process of reflexivity in the twentieth century, modernism came to involve a critical focus on the medium of expression rather than on imitations of the material world (Greenburg 1989). As Franko (1995) observed, however, this shift did not correlate with the rise of modernism in dance, as dances in Europe in the late Renaissance/Baroque period were not attempting to imitate reality. For dance in the West, the "most salient trait of the modernist narrative is its progress from expression as spontaneity to expression as semiological system to the marginalizing of expressive intent" (Franko 1995, ix). The modernization of dance in this cultural context can be seen as paralleling the more general progression of cultural modernism in the West, however, as it has involved a process of deliberately creating distance from previously articulated techniques and ideals (Dils and Cooper Albright 2001).

The emergence of modernism can be attributed to the increasing impact of cross-cultural contact between colonizing and colonized societies (Said 1993; Bhabha 1994; Foster et al. 2004). The contrasts invoked by such encounters led to modernist processes of self-reflection and historical rejection, in both colonizing and colonized cultures. The Arab modernist movement, or *hadatha,* emerged in the early twentieth century, seeking new movements, theories, and ideas and a conscious break from existing traditional cultural structures (Adonis 1980). As a mirror to the European modernist movement, *hadatha* ideologically identified

> the forward motion of time with progress. In this sense, it rejects the tribal/traditional notion that the motion of time embodies a constant distancing of reality from the sources of purity and perfection, i.e. from the golden age. . . . Progress had a Western model and we had to emulate that model to become modern. While it rejected all internal models derived from the past, it did not question the validity of the external model it had set its sight on; nor did it subject that model to the same critique to which it had subjected its own past. (Abu Deeb 2000, 344–47)

Within Arabic, therefore, defining artistic practices as modernist has implied a purposeful rejection of cultural traditions and an uncritical emulation of a Western model of modernism. Determining dance productions as modernist in the Occupied Palestinian Territories can thus carry overwhelming connotations of not just an evolution beyond past ideals but an outright rejection of those ideals. Such a definition of modernity can

be problematic for artists who do not possess such angst against their own traditional culture and are themselves suspicious of Western cultural hegemony.

## The Specificity of Postmodern

Suggesting that the production of culture had become bitterly divided between modernists and traditionalists in Latin America, Garcia Canclini emphasized the importance of postmodernism as a philosophical and artistic paradigm: "The postmodern contribution is useful for escaping from the impasse insofar as it reveals the constructed and staged character of all tradition, including that of modernity: it refutes the originary quality of traditions and the originality of innovations" (1995, 143–44). As an extension and deconstruction of modernism, postmodernism, with its poststructural rejection of meta-narratives and absolute truths (Lyotard 1984), moves away from the cultural specificity of modernism and thus might seem to provide an appropriate label for contemporary cultural production globally. If modernism has been criticized for its ethnocentricity, the influence that colonized populations and postcolonial theory have had on the emergence of postmodernism and poststructuralism has been emphasized by leading postcolonial writers such as Bhabha (1994) and Said (1993). Implicit within their writings is the presumption that postmodernism is an inexorable eventuality and global phenomenon, as postmodern's pluralism and the resulting acquiescence of Western hegemony provides marginalized, colonized populations a position of equality and dignity in global culture.

Postmodernism does not, however, reflect a universally desired set of values. For populations that feel they have undergone very specific historical injustices and suffered massive collective trauma, accepting postmodernism's sudden plurality of perspectives and doubt over the "originary quality of traditions" is not such a prize (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999). Retreating from binary notions of absolute right and wrong (following the genocidal aspects of colonization) may be convenient for a Western culture reviewing its own historical hypocrisies, but this does not necessarily equate with postmodernism being a globally relevant paradigm. Postmodernism can thus seem to rebuke rather than yield, by denying any particular culture an absolute artistic, cultural, spiritual, or historical truth (Chin 1989).

The libertarian pessimism of postmodernism (Eagleton 1991) has not, however, halted the continuity of meta-narratives around the world and defined global cultural production in the twenty-first century. While the Arab post-*hadatha* (postmodernist) movement involved a "collapse of consensus and the intensification of fragmentation," contributing to an "aesthetics of contiguity" (Abu Deeb 2000, 338), this movement did not define all Arab postcolonial cultural activity. The sense of incredulity toward religious meta-narratives rendered postmodernism a disconcerting intent for many: "While Muslims appreciate the spirit of tolerance, optimism and the drive for self-knowledge in postmodernism, they also recognize the threat it poses them with its cynicism and irony. This is a challenge to the faith and piety which lies at the core of their world view" (Akbar 1992, 6). While Islam implies submission to divine revelation, postmodernism implies submission to a



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mirage, an "eternal presentness" that allows for no continuous structures (Majid 2000). Religion is but one meta-narrative that many cultural communities do not desire to cynically deconstruct; historical events such as the refugee crisis and the historic existence of a non-Zionist indigenous population in Palestine are, for example, central to meta-narratives that many in the Occupied Palestinian Territories do not actively seek to doubt and deconstruct through cultural interventions. Thus, if local artistic output in dance is evaluated according to the degree to which it has achieved a postmodern paradigm, the evolution of certain dance products might seem particularly limited as they hold firm to such meta-narratives.

## The Uncertainty of Contemporary

The term "contemporary" is often used to describe innovative dance practices of all varieties from around the globe (see, for example, Dils and Cooper Albright). The term is generally appended to a locality/ethnicity and a cultural medium to suggest a more specific epistemological link, such as "contemporary Palestinian dance," or "contemporary Ethiopian music," or "contemporary African-American writing." Contemporary can thus suggest an intimacy, a sense of creation in our time (Danto 1997).

The live, physical manifestations of dance ideas are, however, inevitably ephemeral. Dance always becomes, therefore, temporarily contemporary when performed. Moreover, the very act of performance involves some degree of innovation, even if such an intention is not explicitly expressed and the danced ideas are supposedly imitations of dance ideas from earlier periods (Cohen 1982). This can render the term "contemporary" a completely superfluous indication of "the present," unless a further idea is associated with the term. If that association is an intention to purposefully innovate for the sake of breaking with past ideas or deconstructing past ideas, then "contemporary" is an equivalent of the terms "modern" and "postmodern" as described above.

The term "contemporary" might otherwise suggest how a current creation expresses an awareness of art history without trying to carry it forward (Belting 1987). Danto describes this process as post-historical, suggesting contemporary art has "no brief against the art of the past" (1997, 5), is not based on the meta-narratives of any particular era, and is "less a style of making art than a style of using other styles" (10). This equates the term "contemporary" with the concept of artistic fusion. Contemporary might thus indicate a past/present fusion, or it may refer to the process of transcultural fusion (Ortiz 1940/1995). Transcultural fusion is particularly, although not exclusively, predominant in communities confronting deculturation. While illustrating the possibility of multicultural harmony, such transcultural fusion can in practice be undertaken within vastly differing contexts, from aggressive cultural hegemony or cultural appropriation to equitable cross-cultural exchange (Marranca and Dasgupta 1991; Taylor 1991; Grau 1992; Bharucha 1993; Garcia Canclini 1995; Chakravorty 2000; Williams 2000; Desmond 2001; Liep 2001; Pavis 1996). Fusion does not necessarily refer to an autonomous diffusion-plus-localized-modification process, in which local agents feel empowered to adjust imported cultural items to suit

local needs. As such, contemporary art as fusion does not necessarily reflect a sense of localized volition.

When applied to dance in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, therefore, the term "contemporary" can carry several contradictory meanings. These include a break from the past, a deconstruction of the past, a fusion with the past, an autonomous fusion with foreign cultural forms, and an undesired submission to foreign cultural influences. As such, the common interpretations of contemporary might confuse rather than clarify the artistic intention and the local evolutionary pathway.

## Postcolonial: Have They Left Yet?

Finally, "postcolonial" is another term that has often been adopted to broadly describe aspects of cultural production occurring in the colonized, or tricontinental (Abdel-Malik 1981), cultures of the world. Postcolonialism might seem an appropriate alternative to modern, postmodern and contemporary, as it specifically "combines the epistemological cultural innovations of the postcolonial moment with a political critique of the conditions of postcoloniality" (Young 2001, 57). Postcolonial theory has been associated with dance movements in Africa (see, for example Edmondson 2001; Reed 2001; Barnes 2005), South Asia (Chakravorty 2000; Meduri 1996), the Philippines (Ness 1997), Cambodia (Sasagawa 2005), Australia (Jewell 2004), and amongst British Asians (Godiwala 2003). In such contexts, the term "postcolonial" is used to distinguish artistic intent from both prevalent Western artistic forms and the local traditional practices that might have preceded colonization.

By emphasizing both the idea of "post" and the idea of "colonial," however, the term "postcolonial" presents particular problems as a general definition of artistic intent. "Post" suggests that the experience of colonization has concluded for the artist/arts community. This might be historically incorrect, as the colonizing power and population may still be present and dominant—a contradiction well summarized by the Aboriginal activist Bobby Sykes's query, "What? Post-colonialism? Have they left?" (as cited in Tuhiwai-Smith 1999, 24). "Post" might also be culturally incorrect, if the cultural residue of colonization continues to exert an influence on current cultural actions (Fanon 1963/1986).

"Colonial" is similarly problematic, as it emphasizes the role that colonization had in local cultural production and insinuates a debt that the artistic product must owe to the colonial process. This therefore posits postcolonial art as either an extended refinement of the colonial project or a construction of an oppositional Otherness in the culture of colonized communities. The term "postcolonial" art might thus suggest art that has come into existence after the colonial process and is somehow struggling to be independent of it, through the salvagist process of "returning to the roots." "Postcolonial art" might alternatively suggest art that fuses the colonial experience with the precolonial indigenous experience, promoting both. "Postcolonial art" might even suggest a critique of the colonial experience through artistic processes that are neither from the colonized nor the colonizing cultures. Postcolonial might also simply determine a particular era, suggesting

that it is art that came into existence after local political autonomy was achieved, without any allusions to the political history or intent of the work.

The term "postcolonial" effectively draws attention to the impact of the colonial experience, and in doing so draws attention away from other possible causes of cultural dislocation in a traumatized community. While its philosophic intent is an important form of dissent against dominant historical discourses, its common meaning, when applied to artistic production, can be interpreted in many contradictory ways. The term "postcolonial," like the term "contemporary," if used when analyzing the evolution of dance in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, can thus obscure the actual artistic intention. It can also appear to deny the contemporary political reality of ongoing colonization.

## Recognizing a Different Thread

When describing cultural activities, terms such as "modern," "postmodern" "contemporary," and "postcolonial" can be seen as presenting a particular restriction on localized cultural evolution. Referring to specific or vague agendas that are not necessarily relevant to the cultural activity being described, these terms can undermine the cultural decision-making processes of a community, define cultural evolution by foreign ideals of progress, and thereby foster a demand for foreign cultural "development" interventions. This can result in foreign patronage and aesthetic control of a traumatized community's culture (Clifford 1987; Chatterjee 1993).

These terms have been used extensively, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and elsewhere, to define localized forms of cultural modernity and processes of cultural evolution. This has often led to the presumption, by leading ethnographers and postcolonial theorists (for example, Clifford and Marcus 1986; Said 1993; Bhabha 1994; Garcia Canclini 1995), that terms such as "postmodernism" must inevitably define the cultural goal of marginalized populations. As my research suggests, however, this presumption does not always correlate with reality for dance in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Whereas certain dance products have emerged from processes that have pursued modernist and postmodernist ideals, and numerous dance products could be categorized amongst the various interpretations of contemporary and postcolonial, there is a particular thread of artistic activity and cultural evolution in the Occupied Palestinian Territories that is not accurately reflected by these terms. It is this thread that has been the primary focus of my evolutionary research, leading me to propose the term "post-salvagism" as a descriptive label of artistic intent.

## Post-Salvagism

Post-salvagism follows after the salvagist process of saving and preserving cultural artifacts and practices in a community that has undergone a process of massive socio-cultural dislocation (often, although not exclusively, resulting from foreign colonization). *As an extension of salvagism, post-salvagism continually re-examines cultural heritage*

*from the dislocated past and struggles to incorporate it into the needs of a contemporary social environment.* This involves re-invigorating evolutionary motion into salvaged culture through

- adapting the salvaged items into contemporary settings,
- reinterpreting the salvaged items from different perspectives,
- blending the salvaged items with each other and items from elsewhere, and/or
- revising the local understanding of the items and the actual past that the items came from.

These post-salvage processes disturb the salvage paradigm, which perceives the adapting, blending, re-interpreting, and revising of salvaged items and the past as a denial of traditions and stasis, increasing the threat of deculturation. The relationship between post-salvagism and salvagism might thus be posited in Bhabha's (1994) terms as the difference between culture as an active, enunciatory site rather than an epistemological object. This enunciation is not merely an emulation of foreign modernities, however, but an active process of reconnecting the local cultural present with the dislocated cultural past. Post-salvagism is thus presented as a semantic release from the seeming dichotomy of museum-style preservation and Western concepts of progress. In doing so, it challenges the binary relationship fostered by the cultural labels traditional and popular (Spalding and Woodside 1995; Doolittle and Elton 2001; Strother 2001).

Through post-salvagism, cultural activists "use the past with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope" (Fanon 1963/1986, 187). While acknowledging the significance and relevance of the salvaged past, post-salvagists emphasize the importance of the present and consider how both can contribute to the future. Whereas salvagism can be seen as a counter-hegemonic argument, an attempt to decenter the dominant and sabotage hegemonic discourse, post-salvagism might be considered an *anti*-hegemonic argument that continues within salvagism's alternate narrative. As an anti-hegemonic ideal, post-salvagism is not defined by a need to either resist *or* yield to foreign cultural influences. It acknowledges that there are multiple historic narratives within a salvaged culture and tries to give voice to each and thus diversify the trajectories of a salvaged culture. In this sense, post-salvagism seeks a return to the existing evolutionary processes and diversity that existed within a culture prior to a period of massive social disruption.

Distinct from the way that the modernists rejected the overbearing classical and Romantic traditions that preceded them, post-salvagists recognize that their community's sudden departure from earlier cultural practices was not of their own choice but rather a choice made for them by external forces. Their movement "beyond salvage," therefore, is not limited to a movement away from the past but a reinterpretation of the past in a contemporary setting.

Post-salvagism similarly maintains no postmodern rejection of meta-narratives. Although it fosters a certain fragmentation of discourse through the diversification of historical narratives within the salvaged culture, it allows for the sacred and the possibility of universal, unquestionable, and absolute meta-narratives, such as those presented by

religion, politics, or historical events. Post-salvagism thus provides space for the participation in cultural evolution of those with fundamental ideals, in a way that postmodernism does not. While the aesthetics of modernism and postmodernism are thus evaluated by the degree to which the cultural products have emancipated themselves from the ideological structures of their own past (Carroll 1988; Greenburg 1989; Danto 1997), *the aesthetics of post-salvagism demand to be evaluated by the degree to which the salvaged past has been both diversified and integrated into a vision of the present and future.*

The postsalvage paradigm can be seen as complementary to postcolonial theory, but they are not synonymous concepts. Postcolonialism is both too broad and too narrow a category to describe post-salvagist cultural activity. Too broad because it renders post-salvagism indistinct from salvagism and localized modernisms/postmodernisms; too narrow because it suggests salvagism and post-salvagism are limited to the traumatic effects of colonialism and not other forms of cultural amputation (such as emigration, for example).

## Conclusion

Observations of dance in the Occupied Palestinian Territories can reveal an artistic movement that is continually battling against both foreign definitions of modernity and local fears of the loss of cultural autonomy. In an attempt to bring greater clarity to this creative movement, I have introduced the concepts salvagism and post-salvagism.

Salvagism and post-salvagism are new words but not original ideas. They describe processes of cultural perception, practice, and criticism that have been occurring in the Occupied Palestinian Territories for decades. As words, their meanings can be very broadly interpreted, and ultimately they can become stifling categories of meaning. As words, however, they are an important means of (a) addressing the theory, technique, aesthetics, and politics of a cultural product, and (b) of highlighting the existence of a local process of cultural evolution. Recognizing the autonomy of this evolution is an important step, if the foreign hegemony fostered by the "cultural development" paradigm is to be challenged (rather than supported) within future cultural interventions.

By clarifying this evolutionary pathway, this article hopes to provide a basis from which localized decisions regarding the evolution of dance can be more clearly motivated, appreciated, and sustained in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and elsewhere. I have focused this discussion on dance, yet numerous other art forms might be considered from a post-salvage paradigm. The notion of post-salvagism might even be applied to more diverse aspects of human culture. The ways in which politically marginalized communities conceive of their own education, health, economic, and political systems, for example, could benefit from research based on a post-salvage paradigm. For communities around the world that have suffered cultural dislocation, particularly for those under (or emerging from) colonial domination, the concept of post-salvagism may resonate and provide a platform from which to view, and be inspired by, their own cultural evolution.

## Notes

1. The term "indigenous" here might seem controversial, given the varied speculations about ancient ethnic links to the region. Interpreting the definition provided by Article 1 (b) of the International Labour Organization's (1989) *Convention Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries,* I use the term "indigenous" here to refer to a particular population group (and their biological descendents) who inhabited a region prior to a politically orchestrated process of foreign colonization. As such, the term "indigenous" can be seen as always relative, dependant upon a distinct colonizing population that competes for control of the geographic space. It is important to clarify and emphasize that in such a dichotomous relationship as in Palestine, I posit Zionism, not Judaism, as the basis of such a collective identity for the colonizing population of Palestine. This is in recognition of the existence of Jews amongst the mostly Muslim and Christian indigenous population of historic Palestine (McCarthy 1990; Doumani 1992; Morris 2001), and in recognition of the foreign/colonial nature of political Zionism (Shafir 1996).

2. The notion that some cultures were static since antiquity can be seen as inspired by the late nineteenth-century salvage anthropologists such as Malinowski, Kroeber, and Boas (Clifford 1987) and subsequently promoted within the premise of dynamic and static cultures by structural anthropologists (for example Levi-Strauss 1963).

3. It is important to emphasize here that the evolution of culture is posited in meme theory as analogous to the evolution of genes but not in any way guided by it. This distinguishes meme theory from previous theories that have contentiously linked culture with biological evolution, such as social Darwinism (Hofstadter 1944) or sociobiology (Wilson 1975).

4. For a more in-depth analysis of applying meme theory to the evolution of dance, see (Rowe 2007, 2008).

5. This article considers Palestine historically as a geographic, rather than political, entity, which, prior to the twentieth century, nevertheless exhibited a complex sociocultural cohesion (see Canaan 1927; Doumani 1992; Swedenburg 1993; Matar 2000; Gerber 2003; Halbrook 1981).

6. Given the contentious claims relating to Orientalists within leading texts on dance in the Middle East, it is perhaps important to address this debate here. In her popular study of dances in the Middle East, Wendy Buonventura offers the following critique of Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism:*

> The current, widely held view of Orientalism derives from Edward Said's thesis that the West has exploited, misunderstood and even invented the East for its own sinister purposes. From the wealth of material available, it is easy to select examples to suit this theory and ignore those that do not. However, Orientalist attitudes to the Middle East are as varied as human beings. An obsession with European colonialism has unfortunately blinded many critics to the complex interrelationship which has existed between Europe and the Arab-Islamic world for hundreds of years. This obsession has merely served to prolong the misunderstanding which exists between them. Many Europeans who went to the Arab world compared the life they found there favorably with that of Europe. (1990, 55)

Intent on dismissing the impact of colonization on cultural encounters, Buonaventura fundamentally misunderstands and misrepresents Said's *Orientalism.* Said does not doubt the ability of Europeans to appreciate cultures in the colonized world. He observes that even when appreciative, however, European literary discourse on these cultures in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were generally defined by a sense of cultural superiority. Said goes on to argue that this sense of cultural superiority has subsequently fostered a moral platform for European political actions abroad, such as invasion, colonization, appropriation of resources, economic conquest, and cultural imperialism.

7. For further discussion on the freezing and centralizing impact of nationalist ideals on dance heritage in other regions of the globe, see Shay 2002 and Buckland 2006.

8. While the expulsion of the indigenous population by colonial Zionists and the state of Israel has been denied within various colonial narratives (for example, Schectman 1952; Kimche and Kimche 1960; Kohn 1961; Lorch 1961; Peters 1988), this process of removal has been increasingly acknowledged by Israeli, Palestinian, and international historians (for example, Khalidi 1959, 1978; Childers 1961, 1971; Porath 1977; Hadawi 1979; Sayigh 1979; Said 1979, 1996; Abu Lughod 1981; Segev 1986, 2000; Bar-Joseph 1987; Flapan 1987; Swedenburg 1987, 1989, 1990, 1993, 1995; Morris 1988, 1993, 1994, 1996, 2001; Muslih 1988; Pappe,1988, 1997, 1999, 2006; Said and Hitchens 1988; McCarthy 1990; Wasserstein 1991; Masalha 1992; Shafir 1996; Khalidi 1998; Shlaim 1999; Kanaana 2000).

9. Author's interview with Lina Harami. Dancer, choreographer, and dance teacher, Sareyyet Ramallah Group for Music and Dance. Interview conducted in English in Ramallah on the 7th of April, 2006.

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