

Epilogue

Not one to give *Miss Saigon* the last word, I would like to offer a different ending. I would like to end with an analysis of Maura Nguyen Donohue's *Lotus Blossom Itch* (1997) as an example of choreography that offers a multi-valent critique of modern dance history, the trope of the Oriental dancing girl, sex tourism, *Miss Saigon*, anthropology, and the social expectations of community theater. If Sue Li-Jue missed the "Asian American mark," Club O' Noodles missed the "technique mark," and "The Amazing Chinese American Acrobat" waffled between the two as an intellectual exercise, then Donohue's *Lotus Blossom Itch* provides a provocative spectacle for the politically savvy viewer who also appreciates a well-placed *battement*.

At the conclusion of Donohue's *Lotus Blossom Itch*, the members of her group, In Mixed Company, trickle out onstage dressed in street clothes, ready to leave the theater. The dancers walk past three men in sarongs standing under a spotlight in perfect stillness. Without any regard to the three men, who are frozen in mid-gesture blowing kisses to the audience, the rest of the dancers complain about the evening's performance, the size of the theater, the lack of dressing rooms, the conditions of the bathroom, the choreographer, and each other. In a final moment of frustration, one of the women heading for the building exit explodes in a fit of anger, "I don't want to come back and do the show tomorrow. I'm not even getting paid. I'm fuckin' tired of being a lotus blossom pussy!"

This final choreographed outburst near the end of Donohue's forty-minute critique of the trope of the Orientalized dancing girl embodies the encounter between Asian Americans and dance history. It gestures toward performance and choreography as forms of representation as well as representational practices. The men frozen in time are still "in the performance," while the dancers perform the post-performance kvetch. The staging of these two different temporal moments signals the aesthetic boundaries that the work draws upon: performance art, modern dance, and theater. The dancer

who is “sick and tired of being the lotus blossom pussy” refuses to be the silent dancing body, even though she has just spent the evening playing the role. This paradox speaks to the way in which the lotus blossom image is a site for critique because it reflects how Asian American bodies performing onstage are caught in a web of representational histories. The lotus blossom provides the backdrop for Asian American dancetheater’s potential for subverting dominant histories of U.S. modern dance, and for its limits.

Lotus Blossom Itch performs the invisibilized Orientalism of early-twentieth-century U.S. modern dance and its colonial origins in the guise of human exhibits. Like St. Denis, who merged highbrow appropriations of Eastern spirituality with lowbrow vaudeville dance routine, Donohue borrows a similar tactic, albeit with differing results. Choreographically, Donohue uses “exotic dancing” as a point of reference to investigate the ways in which exotic subjects are perceived as foreign, sensuous, and sexually available. She investigates how “world, ethnic, folk, or cultural” dance forms are used as shortcuts indicating expressions of ethnic identity as well as stereotypes of ethnic identity.

Donohue’s most provocative use of choreography illuminates the similarities between the package-tour industry’s marketing of world dance forms as signifiers of essentialized ethnic-as-national identity and those of the sex-tour industry’s marketing of racially essentialized pornography. Choreographically, Donohue asks, “What makes an Oriental massage Oriental?” Donohue offers an array of Oriental dancing girls—hula dancers in grass skirts and coconut shells, natives in natural habitats doing mating dances, and Salome and her seven veils—to demonstrate the range with which the dancing Asian body has been imagined in the service of sexual fantasy. For Donohue, these sexualized bodies are ultimately informed by discourses of militarized prostitution. At work in *Lotus Blossom Itch* is the ever-present specter of *Miss Saigon*—the blockbuster Broadway musical that continues to entertain the world with its recycled Madame Butterfly narrative sung by a cast of scantily clad Filipino women playing Vietnamese bar-girls.

Lotus Blossom Itch begins with a greeting by three Asian American men wearing sarongs. Two of them drum on guitars as they welcome and inform the audience that they are about to embark on a scheduled departure of Fantasy Tour B. The audience is taken on a “tour” of exotic Asian cultures through the lenses of sexual voyeurism, cultural appropriation, and consum-

erism. Donohue unearths the intertwined history between Orientalism in high-art Western dance vocabularies and the trope of the exotic, erotic, Oriental dancing girl. The three men act as tour guides, explaining to the audience that Fantasy Tour B is an all-inclusive vacation package and the first stop is Hawaii. The guides introduce Miss Hawaii and disclose that she is really from St. Louis (pronounced “St. Louie”). Miss Hawaii enters the stage wearing a grass skirt and a bikini top made out of coconut shells. She is flanked by two men wearing loincloths and begins to undulate her arms while gyrating her hips in a mock hula. Donohue combines signifying gestures of hula, modern dance, contact improvisation, and striptease to critique the way in which the “Oriental dancing girl” is easily seen within the framework of a sexual fantasy.

Actual hula vocabulary is interrupted by stereotypical hula movements in order to disrupt a romanticized reading of cross-cultural moments. Since the appropriation of Asian aesthetics is critically invisible within the narrative of a unified American cultural identity, Asian American artistic production is continually read as an attempt to reconcile a conflicted cultural identity between East and West. Asian-ness is always held in diametrical opposition to Western-ness, specifically movement vocabulary and choreographic approaches, despite a century of cultural appropriation. Donohue’s choreography critiques the way in which the desire for seeing authentic bodies performing authentic culture is also part of an Orientalist fantasy that easily substitutes costumes for actual people and cultural understanding. Donohue presents a series of cabaret-style “tourist dances” such as the hula, belly dance, and fan dance in order to examine the ways in which the sex-tour and porn industries use Orientalist cultural signifiers to market Orientalized female bodies as a special brand of sexual pleasure.

Miss Hawaii continues her slow-paced undulations while two male dancers beginning stomping and hooting. A voiceover calls attention to the “natives” authentically dancing in a “primitive” manner, while the two men thrust their hunched torsos back and forth. Movements reminiscent of the perfunctory tourist dance show are now framed by a zoolike context suggestive of the late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century world expositions and the practice of displaying non-white people in fake authentic settings. A voiceover announces that souvenirs can be purchased in the gift shop after the tour. One of the men gradually moves the undulations of his

torso down his body until he is executing a series of pelvic thrusts. He starts dancing as if he is stripping, while the other man maintains his primitive dancing. Eventually the man thrusting his pelvis back and forth ends up standing near or behind Miss Hawaii. The men alternate between primitive dancing and erotic dancing as a comment on a history of anthropological studies and the construction of racial otherness. The scene is also reminiscent of ethnographic films that attempt to document “native life.” These films often frame non-Western people in the same way that wildlife documentaries frame their subjects: they focus on how people hunt for food, sleep, eat, get dressed, and ultimately reproduce.

Choreographically, Donohue uses both high-art and low-art dance vocabularies to reveal the close connections among the tourist dance-show, the sex-tour industry, striptease, modern dance, and contact improvisation. She references the legacies of early modern dancers, such as Isadora Duncan and particularly Ruth St. Denis. Donohue’s choreography is a critique of an American modern and postmodern dance history that—under the guise of depoliticization, “artistic innovation,” and “abstraction”—has rendered invisible its continual cycle of Orientalism. Donohue exposes the way in which movement vocabularies—such as contact improvisation, with its reputation for democracy, being in the moment, experiencing movement, and access to an intellectually and spiritually enlightened alternative lifestyle—masks Orientalist appropriations that have marked every significant shift in American dance history. We recall Ruth St. Denis’s pan-Orientalist dances, Martha Graham’s fascination with Asian female dancing bodies, Merce Cunningham and the *I Ching*, Judson Church’s claims to Zen-like mindsets, and contact improvisation’s foundation of aikido. The historical trajectory of high-art American dance idioms depends upon an impulse to create choreography for a sophisticated audience who can intellectually appreciate movement vocabulary without the baggage of mainstream social contexts. Donohue choreographs against the move toward abstraction.

Ruth St. Denis’s interpretations of the Orient provided American modern dance with an opportunity for artistic legitimacy. Her pursuits did not occur in an artistic vacuum. Instead, her choreography is part of the political continuum in which the fantasy of interracial sex involving geishas and other renditions of Asian female prostitutes retains its popular appeal. These images

fuel a booming market for sex tours in Asia and Hawaii, the mail-order bride industry, and sanctioned military prostitution. Asian prostitution is racially differentiated from prostitution in general, such that young Asian women and girls are considered to have an unproblematic affinity for sex work.

Later in *Lotus Blossom Itch*, we are presented with Salome and her seven veils. A woman wearing a gold lamé bikini top and a skirt made out of scarves comes out on stage. She begins removing her veils one by one. She gestures at Middle Eastern dancing while drawing attention to her scantily clad body. She takes the scarves off of her skirt and runs them over her body before throwing them into the air. Other scantily clad female dancers run onstage trailing scarves behind them and a voiceover announces “Isadora,” just as Salome turns her back to the audience and kicks up her leg while reaching toward the sky with her arms. Moments later, the voiceover announces “Ruth St. Denis” and “Denishawn” when a male dancer in harem pants enters to dance with Salome. The lights dim and, instead of continuing to remove her veils one by one, Salome places a hand on her waist and forcefully rips off her entire skirt, exposing her gold lamé G-string. While Salome has her back to the audience, the voiceover announces that it is real, 100 percent gold lamé and can be purchased in the gift shop.

Salome and her partner execute a duet while rolling on the floor and lifting each other. Behind them is a larger group, dimly lit, crawling and sliding over one another in a slow, oozing mass. Salome has abandoned her Oriental movement vocabulary and both groups are leaning on, pushing, falling, and rolling over one another, as in contact improvisation. The costumes (or lack thereof) and music draw attention to the dancers’ compromising positions. The choreography uses contact improvisation’s sex-like dance vocabulary to call attention to the sexualized imagery informing the development of American modern and postmodern dance. The scene becomes essentially a live sex show featuring both a heterosexual couple and a group orgy, while the voiceover continues to remind spectators that souvenirs can be purchased in the gift shop. The sexual innuendo in these constant verbal reminders points to the way in which the success of the sex-tour industry depends on the rationalization of sexual exploitation as a necessary component of global capitalism. Donohue mirrors this rationalization in her evocation of Oriental dance, cabaret-style belly dance, contact improvisation, and the sex

act. Choreographically, Donohue makes use of different movement vocabularies to demonstrate the similar ways that exoticism functions in the seemingly different contexts of highbrow concert dance and the seedy strip club.

One of the tour's stops is "China"; it features a real-life China Doll wearing the top half of a silky red pajama suit—the kind found in Chinatown tourist gift shops. The dancer holds a large fan reminiscent of Linda Low's "Fan-tan Fanny" number from *Flower Drum Song*, or a stereotypical burlesque act involving large, feathered fans held strategically to hide a dancer's implied nude torso. The voiceover announces in a matter-of-fact tone that "red is the color of love in China," as the dancer opens and closes her fan. She then slides her legs into second-position splits (a move that is often referred to by its more popular terminology, the "Chinese splits"), and crawls on the ground. Red, a color associated with weddings in China, with communism, and with Asia in general, is sexualized using an American reference to Valentine's Day and the commodification of sex and romance. The movement of the dancer's legs sliding into the splits gestures to ways in which random Asian cultural signifiers (in this case, the color red) and stereotypes (the association of extreme flexibility with Chinese-ness) can be easily nuanced with sexual overtones in the sex industry. It is a way of marketing a kind of racist multicultural porn.

In the finale, Donohue herself appears on stage, but this time the scene is not an exotic Asian locale but a strip joint in New York City's Times Square. Dressed in a black top and a conical straw hat, she performs the role of a stripper who is performing as a Vietnamese prostitute dressed like a peasant. It is an actual strip act in the sense that she ends up topless at the conclusion of her solo. The choreography is based on Donohue's research working in a strip joint. She uses a few props to create her stage persona, because racialized imagery of wartime prostitution can now be worn as a costume. The rest of the company members come out on stage dressed in skimpy latex dresses or shorts, executing Broadway-style choreography in unison. It is hard not to interpret this last section of the choreography as a reference to *Miss Saigon*'s status as legitimate theater, popular culture, tourist attraction, and Asian employment opportunity.

Donohue reappropriates St. Denis's Orientalism to make a choreographic critique of the way in which cultural appropriation makes it difficult

to see dancing Asian female bodies outside of the parameters of the “Oriental dancing girl.” Even in executing a supposedly abstract movement vocabulary, Donohue exposes the mechanisms through which the Asian female body is easily put back into the frame of Orientalism. She also critiques the way the sex industry racializes Asian female bodies via narratives of culturally inflected sexual exoticism. Donohue’s criticisms are overt and the work is politically and sexually explicit. She pairs model-minority cultural behavior in the form of “traditional” dances with professionalized sex, while the model-minority-as-economic powerhouse lurks in her critique of global capitalism and Asian female labor.

In staging the encounter between modern dance history and Asian American critique, *Lotus Blossom Itch* creates space for questioning the choreographic conventions deployed in the dance itself. Just as the ending calls attention to the staged nature of the performance event, the critique of St. Denis, Shawn, and Duncan questions the notion of movement invention. If each subsequent generation of modern-dance choreographers has “broken away” from its dance training, it has always been done with the belief that something new could be developed, accessed, discovered, retrieved, or adapted. One worked with the faith that something new would follow, be it “authentic,” as in the Authentic Movement, or entirely contrived, as in digitized computer programs. Donohue opens the door to thinking about the distance between dancing and Asian American critique.

To write about Asian American dance is to work at the intersection between two discourses. One history sees itself as a lineage of form, while the other sees itself as a politics of representation. It is true that form may, in fact, be political, but to the practitioners of form this may not matter. Similarly, the proponents of the political may be more concerned with the repercussions of representation than with form. Writing about Asian American dance involves negotiating two fields that do not register with each other, such that an Asian American critique of dance history is like holding two simultaneous but separate conversations. I am reminded of Trisha Brown’s *Talking Plus Watermotor*, in which Brown alternates between telling two stories while executing two movement phrases. There is only one body performing both narratives and phrases, but the narratives and the phrases remain unaffected by one another. What the audience sees is Brown’s phenomenal skill in

keeping track. Her body does the work of showing the work, but the individual stories and phrases she performs retain their own identities even in the presence of one another.

What I have attempted to indicate in this book is the scope of “performing research,” which includes the intellectual work of engaging disciplinary audiences who are not typically in conversation with one another. Performing research also involves getting caught up in the creative process as an important component in the analysis of representation. The tension between fixing performed representation into an object of textual analysis and the belief in the ongoing-ness of performance is at the crux of Asian American dance studies. The discourse of dance is centered around literal and figurative mobility—where something cannot be fixed or thoroughly explained. To do so would ruin what pleasure dancing can offer in its ephemerality and thus nonspecificity. Without a tangible identity, dance, then, is slippery and elusive. It asserts the ability to be anything and everything, existing outside of the banality of politics, social norms, and history.

The history of modern dance—in its claim to the modern, the here, and the presence of the dancing body—is essentially a story about erasing the past. As a discourse, Asian American studies takes up the opposite view of performance; ultimately, it is all about representation. Asian American dance artists offer an alternative view of performance by working within the open conceptual framework of contemporary dance. Their work has the potential to generate layers of meaning, to take on both the presence of the body and issues of representation—thereby challenging previously durable stereotypes and taking us to a deeper understanding of Asian America.