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Flowers Cracking Concrete

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CHAPTER 3

JAPANESE / AMERICAN

The summer 1978 issue of *Bridge: An Asian American Perspective* included a special dance section featuring nine short articles over twenty-four pages (see figure 3.1). In the opening essay, dancer/choreographer and guest editor Reynaldo Alejandro describes the 1970s American dance boom and asks, “What share of this prolific expansion of the dance experience has been the result of Asian American contribution and participation? Does the trend of an increasing role for Asian Americans in dance reflect the fact [that] collectively, we as Asians are fast becoming the most numerous immigrant group, or does it reflect an increase in public interest and demand for our creative skills?” He further notes that “an increasing number of Asian and Asian American performers are appearing in theaters all over the United States; the works of Asian and Asian American choreographers are in increasing demand; and American dancers and choreographers themselves are investigating various Asian dance forms to be performed and researched.”¹

The special section includes features on both Asian American and Euro American artists performing “traditional” Asian dance, as well as two essays in which choreographers Eleanor Yung and Yen Lu Wong describe the development of original contemporary works. This combination of subjects—Asian dancers in America, traditional Asian dance, and new works by Asian American choreographers about the Asian American experience—demonstrates that dance was one of the ways Asian American identity was being worked out in the 1970s. Were Asian Americans simply Asians in America, a diverse group of people who had in common their location in the United States? Were Asian Americans defined by their diasporic cultural practices or by immigrant experiences and encounters with processes of US racial formation? The *Bridge* dance section raises all these questions.

A year later, a 1979 *New York Times* Arts and Leisure feature article by

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**ASIAN
AMERICAN
DANCE**

**THE
ASIAN
AMERICAN
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CONFERENCE**

**AAMHRC
SECTION**

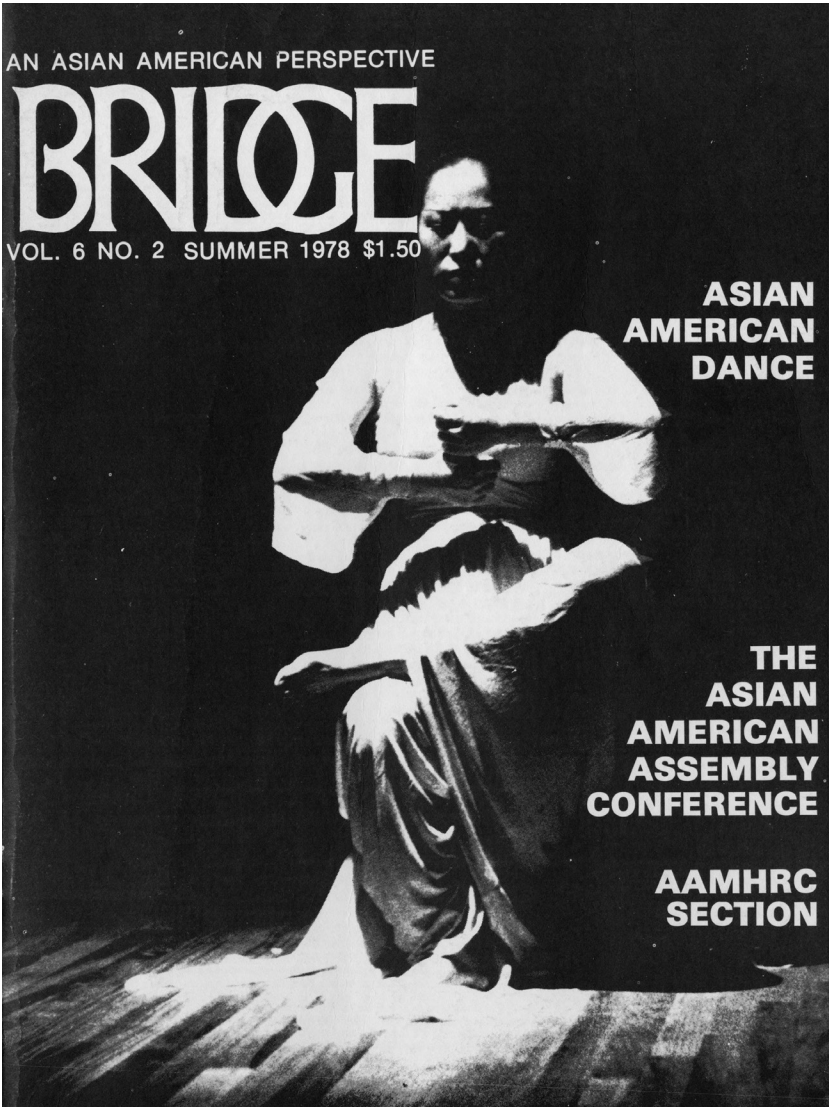


FIGURE 3.1 Cover of Bridge Magazine 6, no. 2 (Summer 1978).
Museum of Chinese in America, Bridge Magazine Collection.

Gwen Chin also noted the increasing presence of Asian American performers in American modern dance companies, asking more specifically, “Japanese Dancers in America: What Draws Them?” The article begins with a listing of single (and presumably singular) Japanese dancers in American dance companies and a discussion of how and why they stand out. Tellingly, there is no indication that any of these dancers may be American, although one is specified as “half-Japanese.” The author goes on to call modern dance “antithetical to traditional Japanese dance” even as she rehearses assumptions, supported by various “experts,” about restrictive tradition in Japan, and in contrast, the possibility of freedom of bodily expression in the United States.²

Eiko & Koma make an appearance at the end of both publications. In the *New York Times* article they are mentioned — and pictured — as choreographers of postmodern works. In the *Bridge* special section they are included in a “Roundtable Discussion with Asian American Dance Choreographers” along with Sun Ock Lee, Saeko Ichinohe, and Reynaldo Alejandro. In response to the interviewer’s first question, “Why have you chosen to choreograph in the modern dance idiom rather than in a traditional Asian dance form?”³ Eiko and Koma clarify that they never practiced any traditional dance form. At that point, Eiko & Koma disappeared abruptly and without explanation from the rest of the roundtable, as if not including “traditional” dance in their influences or work somehow rendered them invisible, even to other Asian Americans at the time. This would suggest that at the time a connection to “tradition” was a fundamental qualifier of Asian American status, even among choreographers making original modern dance works.

I take this literal disappearance from the page as the point of departure for this chapter, which examines the absenting of Eiko & Koma as Asian American subjects. I suggest this absenting is due not only to their apparent inability to fit into concepts of what it means to be Asian American, and specifically Japanese American, but also to discourses that increasingly represented them as Japanese or Asian, even as their work became more and more influenced — and supported — by their lives in the United States. I begin by putting Eiko & Koma’s early performances in the United States in the context of competing discourses of the Asian American movement and what Barbara Thornbury calls “America’s Japan,” which she asserts was formed through reception of kabuki per-

performances in New York, particularly through reporting about these performances in major New York newspapers and magazines.⁴ I then discuss how dance presenters and critics represented Eiko & Koma when they first arrived in the United States in the late 1970s and compare these representations with those from the 1980s and early 1990s to note how perceptions of them changed during that period. In particular, I show how the international circulation of butoh led to a new discourse about Japanese performance that I call a “nuclear discourse,” which linked the avant-garde performance with the aftermath of the American nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I argue that the discourses of kabuki-Japan and “the bomb” impacted the reception of Eiko & Koma’s work, preventing a reading of the work as Asian American and glossing over the ways their work is fundamentally shaped by their lives in the United States. These twin discourses obscure the meaning of the work and in the process limit our understanding of what it means to be Asian American.

Asian America and “America’s Japan”

The *Bridge* and *New York Times* articles demonstrate the competing discourses of the Asian American movement and “America’s Japan” through which Eiko & Koma’s early works were received. The Asian American movement gained momentum in the wake of the civil rights movement in general and the “Third World Strike” demanding ethnic studies at San Francisco State University in 1968 and the University of California, Berkeley, in 1969. *Bridge* was a national publication started by Basement Workshop, a New York Chinatown-based community arts center formed in 1970 and active until the late 1980s. In addition to publishing *Bridge*, Basement Workshop published a collection of art and poetry called *Yellow Pearl* and initiated projects like the Asian American Resource Center. As evidenced by the recent exhibition *Serve the People: The Asian American Movement in New York*,⁵ Basement Workshop was just one part of a vibrant network of Asian American activist and cultural organizations active in New York in the 1970s. *Bridge* covered national politics from an Asian American perspective, including articles on the Vietnam War, national elections, immigration policy, Asian American studies, the Asian American women’s movement, and busing. The magazine showcased culture and Asian American cultural production

side by side with political coverage.⁶ In this context, the *Bridge* special section highlights dance as one of many approaches to defining and enacting Asian American identity and politics.

One of the founders of Basement Workshop, Eleanor Yung, also founded the Asian American Dance Theatre in 1974.⁷ Under the direction of Yung, the Asian American Dance Theatre performed original dances based in modern dance vocabularies with titles like *Identification in Progress #1, #2, #3*; *Sheng Sheng Man*; and *Water Portrait*. Along with the choreographers featured in the *Bridge* roundtable — Alejandro, Ichinohe, and Lee — Yung also participated in a series of concerts in 1979 and 1980 under the name Asian New Dance Coalition.⁸ In both cases, the company and coalition names claim membership in the American contemporary dance scene while asserting the presence of Asians and Asian Americans.

In contrast to *Bridge's* focus on Asian American cultural politics, the *Chin New York Times* article is part of a long history of articles about Japanese performances in New York City. Barbara Thornbury argues that coverage like this had enormous influence, determining for American audiences not only how particular performances were to be understood, but also what it meant to be “Japanese” more broadly. Thornbury maintains that “Japan” was discursively constructed for Americans largely through its synecdoche, “Japanese culture,” which was defined through exposure to Japanese performing arts and particularly kabuki in New York City beginning after World War II and continuing through the 1970s.⁹ In particular, she argues that the way these New York-based performances were presented and interpreted for American audiences, particularly through reviews in the *New York Times* and other similar publications, had an impact far beyond the actual performance halls, producing a discourse of “America’s kabuki-Japan” that not only determines how Japan is understood in America, but also at times supplements or even supplants official diplomacy. Key to America’s kabuki-Japan is the idea of “a Japanese culture characterized by tradition and ahistorical continuity.”¹⁰ This supposed out-of-history quality allowed kabuki to stand in as a counternarrative to the reality of contemporary politics even as it was an important Cold War prize and an actual tool of diplomacy (e.g., a Grand Kabuki visit timed to mark the centennial of the 1860 US-Japanese trade agreement). In other words, the “timeless” and “refined”

qualities ascribed to kabuki allowed American supporters of the art form to present a friendly Japan that both predated and transcended Japanese imperialism, thereby smoothing the way for mutually beneficial postwar military and business arrangements between the two countries.

Although these two discourses, Asian American and America's Japan, as represented by *Bridge* and the *New York Times*, were contemporary with one another, the reach of the former — 700 subscribers at its height¹¹ — was no match for the latter, with a daily circulation of 879,000 in 1978.¹² How could the Asian American discourse even begin to make an impact in the face of such a dominant discourse of Japan? And yet as the changing representations of Eiko & Koma demonstrate, representations of them have remained under contestation for the past forty years.

“The Vanguard of Modern Dance”

Before Eiko & Koma first arrived in New York, there was already a long history of contemporary dance by Asians in America as well as a more recent history of Japanese avant-garde performances at La MaMa E.T.C., a well-known downtown Manhattan venue for experimental and radical performance. In fact, venues like La MaMa provided a frame for understanding avant-garde Japanese theater by artists such as Shuji Terayama¹³ and Kōbō Abe¹⁴ and provided an impetus for other venues to eventually expand their own programming to include new and avant-garde works that could challenge audiences to see something other than “America's Japan.” Thornbury observes, “Although visits to the United States by figures such as Terayama, Abe, and Ono¹⁵ decontextualized them and their output from the networks with which they were associated in Japan, their ties to La MaMa in New York gave them a new, substitute context and ‘downtown’ identity.”¹⁶ Like these artists, Eiko & Koma's performances at noted downtown venues contextualized them in the American avant-garde performance scene, even if the Japanese and European frames of reference for their work were not well understood.

Performances by Japanese avant-garde artists at places like La MaMa, Thornbury suggests, demanded a reevaluation of assumptions about Japanese performance that had cohered in the previous decades, and by association, a reevaluation of the country and culture they were understood to represent. Moreover, they demanded critical attention as art, rather than the more anthropological interest in performance as demon-

stration of culture that kabuki, gagaku, bunraku, and other classical art forms attracted. Eventually the success of these productions impacted the broader producing scene in New York, with organizations like Japan Society cosponsoring La MaMa productions and then eventually diversifying their own programming.¹⁷ Other key “downtown” institutions like BAM and the Joyce Theater also began programming Japanese performance.

During Eiko & Koma’s first tour in 1976 and in the following year when they moved to the United States, they were billed as “Japanese avant-garde dancers,” and their work was called “avant-garde dance in the Japanese manner.”¹⁸ Rather than understanding this as meaning coming from the specificity of the avant-garde in Japan, however, it was generally interpreted in reviews as two separate, and conflicting, categories. Rather than a national identifier, “Japanese” was taken by many critics — in the language of the time — to mean “Oriental,” which not only meant foreign but more importantly, “traditional,” despite the fact that this specific work had no precedent in traditional dances like *nihon buyo* or *bugaku*. Reviews reflected this assumption, freely comparing Eiko & Koma’s work to Zen, kabuki, *noh*, and other Japanese arts. For example, one critic described what she saw as “an unstudied absorption of the classical elements of their native culture.”¹⁹ Others saw parallels to what they called “Oriental stone gardens.”²⁰ As dancers from Japan, Eiko & Koma were assumed to have a background in traditional dance (not unlike in the *Bridge* roundtable), despite their lack of any training in these forms.

Eiko & Koma’s case was not unique. Despite solid downtown credentials, avant-garde works by Terayama and Abe were also filtered through the kabuki discourse with its attendant expectation that the performances represent Japan in some way. Steven Clark explains that artists like Terayama “faced a strange paradox: at home the troupe typically fit into universal categories like the avant-garde or underground theater, but when they performed in Europe or America they often found themselves representing geopolitical particularities like ‘Japan’ or even ‘the East.’”²¹ Even when the pieces themselves challenged the discourse, the discourse was nonetheless evident in reviews of those pieces. Not only were these performances understood as essentially “Japanese,” the kabuki discourse went a step further to render them traditional and ahistorical.

Shoko Letton observes that “the art world’s acceptance of and famil-

ilarity with Japanese art movements readied American audiences to welcome and accept Eiko and Koma's dance — but also created a filter for how their works were perceived.”²² Indeed, as Bert Winther has shown, there is a long and complex history of what he calls Japaneseness in American art, including a European-influenced *Japonisme* of the late nineteenth century that was interested in the formal properties of Japanese art, and a midcentury “Oriental thought” period that sought to digest and apply perceived “Asian ideals” into “original,” abstract art.²³ In dance, well-known examples of this include Merce Cunningham's use of chance procedures involving the *I Ching* and the uncredited though widely recognized application of aikido techniques in the formation and practice of contact improvisation.²⁴ Whereas white American dancers were credited with originality for their avant-garde pieces, Eiko & Koma's own original works, in the eyes of presenters and critics of the time, slipped easily from avant-garde into an essentialized Japaneseness. Deborah Wong's insightful observation — “Given the susceptibility of American audiences to orientalist pleasure — their willingness to give themselves over to it — I must ask what happens when performers think they are saying one thing and audiences hear something else entirely, and whose responsibility it is to redirect the reading”²⁵ — guides this chapter.

This unselfconscious Orientalism notwithstanding, critics and presenters firmly concluded that the pair fit into the postmodern or “New Dance” scene, calling them part of the “vanguard of modern dance”²⁶ and “a force in the avant-garde to be reckoned with.”²⁷ Presenters, too, agreed. Though the pair's first performance was at Japan Society, they were quickly booked at spaces that specialized in postmodern and avant-garde dance and performance. Moreover, Eiko & Koma appeared in festivals and seasons with luminaries of American modern and postmodern dance alike, including Sophie Maslow, Hanya Holm, Rudy Perez, Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane, Molissa Fenley, Sarah Rudner, Margaret Jenkins, Lynn Dally, ODC, Bella Lewitzky Dance Company, and Mangrove. They were reviewed alongside Dana Reitz, Dance Theater of Harlem, Lucinda Childs, and Susan Rethorst. This suggests that despite the persistence of a discourse of ahistorical Japaneseness evident in reviews, in practice Eiko & Koma were understood in the context of modern and postmodern dance.²⁸

Butoh and the Bomb

By the early 1980s Eiko & Koma began to receive their first important commissions and grants from American agencies and organizations, including the American Dance Festival, the Walker Art Center, BAM First Wave, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Even as they were incorporated more and more into the American concert dance scene and its accompanying presenting and funding structures, the larger Japanese-American relationship began to shift, within and without the US borders. The relationship between Japan and the United States, which had been closely intertwined since the postwar occupation and subsequent structural investment, cooled in the face of the declining status of US industry and increasing economic competition from Japan. In the United States the movement for reparations for the internment of Japanese Americans gained strength even as the model minority discourse held up East Asians — and specifically Japanese Americans — as ideal, yet still separate, citizens. It was during this time that butoh began to be known internationally and the first butoh dancers, including Eiko & Koma's teacher Kazuo Ohno, performed in New York. I argue that the appearance of butoh provided the impetus for a new discourse about "America's Japan." Whereas the kabuki discourse persuaded Americans after World War II that the Japanese were a refined and highly cultured people with whom we could safely do business, a developing butoh discourse linked Japan with the cataclysm of the nuclear bomb, reassuring struggling Americans of their modernity in comparison to the postnuclear Japanese, who were, thanks to butoh, imagined as prehistoric.

In his book *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*, David Palumbo-Liu argues that the borders between Asian/American are continually being redefined and renegotiated. In particular, Palumbo-Liu draws our attention to moments when distinctions between "Asian" and "American" are newly (re)constructed, suggesting that the need to distinguish them arises precisely when the possibility exists that they might merge.²⁹ The economic situation of the United States vis-à-vis Japan in the 1980s, for example, required a renewed distinction between Japanese and American. Palumbo-Liu links the advent of the model minority myth with the rise of Japan's economic power, noting that "appearances of the myth are haunted by a sense of America's weakened

position at home and globally.”³⁰ Lifting Japanese Americans up as a successful group that should be emulated domestically would seem to be an admission to full citizenship: If all Americans should strive to be more like Japanese Americans, does this not mean they are already fully so? And yet being singled out as a model minority perpetuated their always apart status and highlighted Japanese Americans’ metonymic relationship to Japan.³¹ Like their counterparts in Japan, Japanese Americans — suggested the myth — had overcome a difficult past through hard work and perseverance. Internationally, the model minority myth worked as a clear call to emulate Japanese approaches to work ethic and economics. Domestically, however, the myth served to divide and conquer communities of color previously aligned through movements like the “Third World Strike.” In particular, Japanese American success was defined over and against apparent African American failure and, as Palumbo-Liu observes, “was deployed to contain and divert civil rights policymaking, to neutralize activism, and to promote a laissez-faire domestic urban policy.”³² If Japanese Americans could succeed, clearly the solution was not in policy or structures, but in an ethnic or racial group’s own makeup, or so the logic went.

In addition to his legal, political, and economic analysis, Palumbo-Liu is interested in the ways that culture participates in constructing the Asian American body, psyche, and space. While his attention is largely focused on literature, we can consider the ways performance participates in this process. For example, Japan’s economy was not the country’s only notable performance in the 1980s. Kazuo Ohno’s 1980 international debut at the Nancy International Theatre Festival produced a widespread buzz about the “new” modern dance from Japan, which was first seen in the United States the following year at La MaMa E.T.C. A central figure in the development and spread of butoh, Ohno himself had a deep history in Japanese modern dance. Reviews of Ohno’s first US performance noted Eiko & Koma’s relationship to him; as established figures in the city, it was Eiko & Koma who could provide a frame for Ohno for New York audiences. Even with Ohno, the pull of the kabuki discourse was strong, as is evident in Anna Kisselgoff’s review of Ohno’s *Dead Sea*, in which she attempted to explain his cross-dressing via her previous experience with kabuki.³³ Though Ohno’s cross-dressed character is based directly on Divine from Jean Genet’s *Our Lady of the Flowers*, Kissel-

goff's reading of his dance places him on a continuum with *onnagata*, men who perform female characters in kabuki, which serves to take the performance out of a very specific artistic and political referent and fix it instead as traditional and timeless.³⁴

I am not suggesting that this process of framing the avant-garde as traditional was intentional. As Thornbury has skillfully shown, visiting gagaku, kabuki, noh, kyōgen, and bunraku artists in the 1950s and 1960s had already cemented the association between Japanese performance and descriptors like “national treasure” and “intangible cultural property.” In fact, those very concepts can be traced to the 1950 Japanese *Bunkazai Hogohō* (Cultural Properties Protection Law), which sought to develop a strong postwar Japanese cultural identity precisely through those performance forms. American audiences, then, came to understand Japanese performing artists as purveyors of cultural heritage, an understanding that was then unconsciously transferred to any artist who was seen as “authentically” Japanese, even if that artist's practices were not actually traditional. So rather than (or sometimes in addition to) contextualizing butoh as an avant-garde or modernist performance practice parallel to performance art or postmodern dance or theater, critics attempted to place it in what Thornbury calls “the discourse of cultural continuity.”³⁵ Ruby Shang, for example, wrote that butoh “is as diverse and confusing to the Western eye as the rest of Japanese culture may seem. However, a sense of proportion, or ‘*ma no kankaku*,’ steeped in years of tradition, pervades choreography, as well as the other art forms.”³⁶ Shang was far from alone in such proclamations, which in effect told audiences that they were seeing something they could not understand because it was foreign (or that the way to understand it was through recourse to tradition). Such descriptions not only divorced performance practices like butoh from their own modern and radical histories, but also fixed them as essentially Japanese. This is particularly ironic for something like butoh, which had in its formation a strong critique of what it meant to be Japanese.³⁷

Until mid-1984, the kabuki discourse dominated reviews of Ohno, Dairakudakan, and even Eiko & Koma. Even though critics called the artists avant-garde, they persisted in comparing the performers to kabuki. This changed with the 1984 North American premiere of Sankai Juku and the accompanying introduction of the term “butoh” in the *New*

York Times. Kisselgoff wrote, “This sense of the unreal, of hallucination and of pain in a visionary context is part of the imagery in a new, current dance trend that specializes in the grotesque. I am speaking here of the Butoh movement in Japan, an underground phenomenon that is nonetheless already the a [sic] favorite on the international festival circuit.”³⁸

Dairakudakan was founded in 1972 by Akaji Maro, an actor, dancer, and director who had participated in Hijikata’s dance experiments alongside Ohno throughout the 1960s. Maro, still an active performer and dance maker today, has always encouraged his dancers to start their own companies, and Ushio Amagatsu was one of the first to take his advice, starting Sankai Juku in 1975. Sankai Juku is notable for being one of the first butoh companies to have significant international success; the company has split its time between France and Japan since 1980 and is often both celebrated and criticized for producing an aestheticized butoh for Western audiences. Even though Amagatsu was a third-generation butoh performer and choreographer, in the United States his work became a template for explicating the form as a whole.³⁹

A frequently quoted passage from a 1984 *New York Times* feature article about Eiko & Koma and Sankai Juku by Kisselgoff, “Japanese Avant-Garde Dance is Darkly Erotic,” proved key in establishing a popular understanding of butoh. The article proffers a definition of butoh as a “compound of the grotesque and the beautiful, the nightmarish and the poetic, the erotic and the austere, the streetwise and the spiritual.”⁴⁰ This collection of surprising juxtapositions—also including creation and destruction, metamorphosis and transcendence—is still an apt description of many butoh dances because it puts into words the physical processes Hijikata and others developed for layering multiple, often impossibly contradictory, images into one body. But then Kisselgoff introduces the uncited assertion that the Japanese word butoh “derives from a word having to do with ancient ritualistic dance,” which leads immediately to the incorrect conclusion that “certainly the prehistoric and the ritualistic are among the prime concerns of Butoh’s choreographers.”⁴¹ As discussed in chapter 1, butoh’s concerns were in fact specifically post-modern, developing new corporealities in response to rapid industrialization and fundamental changes in Japanese society in the late 1950s and 1960s.⁴² The title of Sankai Juku’s performance in Toronto, *Homage to Pre-History (Jōmon Shō)*, was likely a major influence on Kisselgoff’s as-

sumptions about the connection between butoh and prehistory. In fact, “Jōmon” refers not to a generic prehistory but to the Jōmon period in Japan (approximately 12,000–300 BC). As discussed in chapter 1, Japanese avant-garde artists were interested in the Jōmon period as a mythological source of a Japanese culture untainted by outside influences (e.g., Buddhism and the Chinese writing system) and also as something pre-dating and therefore outside of Japan’s recent imperialist and violent history. The past of the Jōmon became for artists a source for actively imagining another present and future. The translation of the Sankai Juku title from “Jōmon” to “prehistory” erases this specificity.

If kabuki was seen to be timeless and therefore ahistorical, then butoh was seen as prehistoric, not because it had always been that way, but rather because something had caused the prehistoric state. Kisselgoff writes, “Moreover this emergence from the primordial begins with an image that suggests that an unnamed cataclysm has preceded it.”⁴³ Though Kisselgoff does not herself refer to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in her article, audiences and other critics soon began to associate the cataclysm they read into the damaged bodies they saw on-stage with bodies damaged by the bomb. For example, Mindy Aloff, in a review of Eiko & Koma’s *By the River* at Asia Society, writes, “The style is grounded in Butoh, a mutant species of dance theater that developed in the couple’s native Japan a quarter-century ago. You can taste in it well-known performance traditions (Noh, Kabuki); Western modern dance (notably the Wigman school); the unconventional wit of its founders (including Eiko and Koma’s teacher, the late Tatsumi Hijikata); and nuclear terror (evoked through film noir lighting, vaporous tableaux and dire, incandescent moods).”⁴⁴ Aloff’s comments are particularly interesting for the way they explicitly link the avant-garde to both the traditional and the bomb at the same time. That same year, Debra Cash observed in a feature article on Boston’s Dance Umbrella’s Japan season: “Butoh’s nuclear message both titillates American audiences and sends them on a guilt trip.”⁴⁵ What her comment does not acknowledge, however, is that the nuclear message is one inserted by those very audiences.

Butoh’s growing reputation in the United States fit nicely into the mode of holding up Japanese (economic) performance as a singular accomplishment. More important, however, is that it offered an opportu-

nity to discursively renegotiate the Japanese-US relationship. While the kabuki discourse was useful for making Japan seem nonthreatening and aestheticized in the postwar period, the new context of economic competition required a new discourse, and Sankai Juku's version of butoh provided that through the specter of the atomic bomb.⁴⁶

The reading of butoh as a response to the bomb is a uniquely American response to the form. "America's butoh," just like Thornbury's "America's kabuki," was a particular discursive construction that developed out of the reception of Japanese performance in a specific historical and political context. Whereas the kabuki discourse attempts to cover over evidence of the war and smooth away inconvenient images of the former enemy, now ally, with recourse to a timeless tradition, the developing butoh and the nuclear discourse acknowledged destruction, but in a way that erased modernity, not to mention postmodernity. In effect, the nuclear discourse moves Japan back in time before the economic miracle and freezes it in August 1945, a moment of absolute American supremacy over Japan. A discursive turn morphs the postnuclear into the prehistoric. Even the word "mutant" suggests a postnuclear creation, something like Godzilla: a prehistoric monster brought to life by a modern (Western) invention.⁴⁷ It is almost as if butoh provided the evidence that, as the saying goes, we "bombed them into the Stone Age."⁴⁸ "America's butoh" is an effective reminder of who has the power. The underlying message of the 1980s butoh nuclear discourse reminded American audiences that we bombed Japan and suggested that the Japanese people's response is to dance about it in a way that reveals their prehistoric state. If the Japanese are prehistoric, then clearly they are not serious competition. The discourse worked to reassure American audiences of their own modernity and thus their superiority vis-à-vis Japanese prehistory.

Through the kabuki discourse, Japanese performing arts, and by extension Japan, were considered high culture. In calling butoh primitive or primal, however, comparisons to "Africa" begin to crop up in reviews.⁴⁹ Whereas model minority discourse defines Japanese/success over and against African American/failure, with the prehistoric and primal qualities of the butoh discourse, "Japanese" could be associated with "African." Eiko responded specifically to the "prehistoric" association in an interview: "It is not a prehistoric thing, it is our fundamental exis-

tence. . . . I am as much a human being as I am a mammal, and animal, a part of nature. All of that is connected.”⁵⁰ Eiko’s attempt to universalize the themes of their work (“our fundamental existence”) was a challenge to the nuclear discourse that sought to impose an evolutionary time line on geographic, political, and cultural difference.

Like the model minority discourse, the nuclear discourse led to Japanese performers being singled out by presenters in Japan seasons and festivals. Instead of reinforcing parallels of modernness as previous modern or postmodern dance bills or festivals had, these new Japan-oriented titles and seasons emphasized difference, a categorization that also conveniently supported ascendant multicultural programming practices of the time. Multiculturalism singles out on the one hand exceptional individuals and on the other hand practices that are seen to represent entire groups and offers their inclusion as proof of successful incorporation of difference into the nation.⁵¹ Orientalist discourses such as America’s kabuki-Japan and the nuclear discourse work hand in hand with multiculturalism to satisfy the needs of the nation by on the one hand incorporating artists of color through multicultural funding policies and on the other hand maintaining a division that affords only white artists the ability to be abstract, while requiring that artists of color be “ethnic” and remain other. Multicultural presenting practices certainly benefited from categorizing Eiko & Koma and other dancers as Japanese, a move that further reinforced the duo’s foreignness, even as they were becoming more and more American.

In these circumstances, *butoh* provided a convenient label for Eiko & Koma’s work, setting it in a Japanese performance context rather than an American postmodern dance context. As discussed in chapter 1, Eiko & Koma briefly studied with the two key figures of *butoh*, Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, but left Japan soon after and never associated themselves with the form. Even though Eiko & Koma have never called their work *butoh*, critics and presenters began using the term more and more to describe them. Kisselgoff’s comment, “perhaps we have been seeing *Butoh* in the United States without being aware of it,”⁵² became a matter of fact for other critics. Increasingly, Eiko & Koma began to be compared to other Japanese dancers (even ones not associated with *butoh*), like Kei Takei and Min Tanaka, in reviews and articles.⁵³ On the one hand

it makes a certain kind of sense that Eiko & Koma would be compared to other Japanese performers, if only because there was a growing number of artists to compare them to. But on the other hand, the implication of the comparisons changing from white American modern and postmodern dancers to Japanese avant-garde and postmodern dancers who were nonetheless made out to be “primal” is significant. Increasingly Eiko & Koma were programmed in “Japan” seasons and discussed in articles not about modern or postmodern dance, as they previously had been, but in articles such as “The Year of Dance from Japan”⁵⁴ or “Japanese Avant-Garde Dance Is Darkly Erotic,”⁵⁵ or simply “Dark Art.”⁵⁶ At precisely the moment when Eiko & Koma were being incorporated into American modern and postmodern dance, they were separated out as Japanese and “prehistoric.”

In the face of these dominant discourses, Eiko & Koma did attempt to intervene in how they were written about and presented. As early as 1985 the dancers released a statement asking presenters and reviewers not to call their work *butoh*. It is worth quoting a 1991 version of that statement at length to understand how Eiko & Koma did and did not want audiences and critics to approach their work. They wrote in part:

In English the term “*Butoh*” has no historical meaning to the general audience, it gives no explanation other than the fact that it is foreign. Since we started to work as Eiko & Koma in 1971, we have never billed ourselves as “*Butoh*,” not in Japan, Europe nor in America. We have always given credit to two wonderful dancers we studied with, Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, who started calling themselves *Butoh* dancers in the early '60s. . . . However, we feel just as indebted to our German teacher as well as other performers we have seen and other teachers we have studied with. . . . Many people may think the outcome of our work looks like *Butoh*, this we do not deny. By all means, we do not think of ourselves as new or original in what we do. We are, however, individualists belonging to no party, responsible only for what we do. We would like to present our work as such and not as a part or example of something like *Butoh*, which we feel may draw an audience of people curious about an exotic oddity. . . . In our work we question our own and

the audience members' individual concerns. This questioning creates a direct relationship between individuals so that if they dislike us, they dislike us and not Butoh.⁵⁷

Despite such a clear message released over a period of time by the artists themselves, the word "butoh" still frequently comes up in relation to Eiko & Koma, demonstrating just how enduring and influential the butoh discourse has been. Casual conversation among dancers and dance fans, and even official sources such as newspaper reviews and the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts topic headings, still persist in categorizing the duo as butoh. And as Bruce Baird is fond of reminding me, Eiko & Koma are second only to Sankai Juku in hits in a LexisNexis full-text search for butoh.⁵⁸

In an interview with *Ballet Review*, Eiko discussed ideas similar to those expressed in their statement but without mentioning the word "butoh":

I am very discouraging to those people who would like to mystify us as coming from Asia. (However I do not deny those differences.) I don't want to reinforce the possibility of your encountering us because of cultural difference: "Oh, we must go see that *because* she's Japanese or Asian." Then if you don't like what I'm doing, you can put it aside. Instead, I want you to ask, "Why don't I like what she's doing?" Or "Why do I like what she's doing?" You start to think and feel in return. I like this better than "Oh, she's Asian, she's Japanese."⁵⁹

In both cases, the choreographers were asking presenters, audiences, and dance critics around the United States to engage with their work on its own terms, not through ideas of what it means to be Asian or Japanese, whether those ideas come from a specific word, like butoh, or from more generalized Orientalist concepts of what the work is or does. Eiko & Koma even raised these issues in a review of their official Japanese premiere in 1989 at Spiral Hall in Tokyo. Giving the reviewer their assessment of what it means to be Japanese performers in New York and what they face, Eiko said, "We're always fighting the mystification process in New York. . . . We don't want the audience to think that our work is beautiful just because it's from Japan and they can't understand it so we put in

extra effort to make it fundamental.” Koma added, “The cultural export business is something that we don’t want to be mixed up in.”⁶⁰

Koma’s comment about cultural export draws our attention to a fascinating contradiction: in the United States the dancers are frequently categorized as Japanese, whereas in Japan they are considered American. Other than their youthful performances in the early 1970s, they have only performed in Japan a handful of times, and when they do, their names are spelled out in *katakana*, the Japanese alphabet reserved for foreign words and names. Eiko & Koma are not alone in bearing the burden of this contradiction. Borrowing from Aiwah Ong, Thornbury calls artists like Eiko & Koma, Yoshiko Chuma, Yasuko Yokoshi, and others “flexible-citizen artists.” Though these artists typically do not live in Japan, through preexisting professional ties or links established later they “reinstantiate their Japanese identity.”⁶¹ For example, invitations to perform at Japan Society, funding from the Japan Foundation, and participation in Japanese-themed festivals serve to forge or reforge cultural connections that then “metaphorically ‘return’ [them] to Japan.”⁶² Thornbury writes, “flexible-citizen artists enter the narrative of America’s Japan because they *and* their artistic practices are linked with and, by extension, considered representative of Japan,”⁶³ even if those links are in fact tenuous or have been mythologized. To complicate matters further, these dancers are also singled out for awards that recognize them as exemplary American artists, a move that reinforces both their status as model minorities and American myths and practices of multiculturalism.

More recently, a discursive tension has developed between a desire for an “authentically Japanese” artist and a “global” one. As Yutian Wong reminds us in her discussion of Michio Ito and the “international artist,” this discourse dates from at least the first half of the twentieth century.⁶⁴ Exotic yet familiar, the exceptional “international artist” is granted the ability in the public eye to float over borders, with no concern paid to social or legal boundaries such as race or immigration. At the same time these artists are not allowed to be grounded as American, nor is their work deemed capable of engaging in American discourses on race or identity. At best, these artists are seen as producing work with transcendent themes capable of universal impact. Ultimately, however, Wong demonstrates that the trope of the international is a (failed) attempt to

gloss very real material and political conditions with a romantic vision of the artist (usually an artist of color) as able to transcend race, bridge cultural gaps, and heal social wounds. To become international then is to be deracialized. As Ito's internment and subsequent repatriation to Japan demonstrate, however, the international artist remains in the end not a bridge, but an Other.

Terms like "flexible-citizen artist" and "international artist" describe the types of binds in which the kabuki and butoh discourses put Eiko & Koma. Moreover, they illustrate the functioning of the constant flux between "Asian" and "American" theorized by Palumbo-Liu. In each case, Eiko & Koma are honored for their contribution to the American dance scene, but are never quite allowed to be seen as American.

Japanese/American

Eiko & Koma's work became so overlaid with American ideas of Japaneseness in the 1980s and early 1990s — valid or not — that it became difficult to see their work as American. Moreover, their style does not explicitly tell Asian American immigration or discrimination stories and therefore was not always recognized by an Asian American audience. Yet in 1994 Eiko & Koma were invited to participate in a yearlong Festival of Asian/Asian American Dance at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Sponsored by the Dance Program and cosponsored by the Asian American Studies Program, the festival featured concerts of Indian and Balinese dance and music ensembles by Mallika Sarabhai and Ngurah Supartha; three shows called "Making Waves," featuring University of Wisconsin faculty and students and guest artists; and a panel discussion, "Dancing Identity: What Does It Mean to Be Asian American?" In many ways the festival paralleled the *Bridge* special section sixteen years earlier with its combination of traditional dance forms, new works, and discussion of the field. In addition to Eiko & Koma, Sun Ock Lee also appeared in *Bridge* and at the University of Wisconsin.

Eiko & Koma were invited to perform their 1991 work, *Land*, which revisits the nuclear issues explored in *Fission* (1979), albeit from a different angle.⁶⁵ Elsewhere I have argued for *Land* as a dance that enacts Asian American cultural politics.⁶⁶ The dance stages a relationship among Native American musicians and Japanese American dancers in an American Southwest landscape, a site of containment for Native Americans

and Japanese Americans alike and for testing of nuclear weapons, including those used on Japan. While creating the dance, Eiko & Koma spent time with musician Robert Mirabal in New Mexico, and he accompanied them to Japan, where they visited Hiroshima and gave a work-in-progress showing of *Land* at the Hiroshima Museum of Contemporary Art. In this dance, rather than appearing as survivors of nuclear devastation as they did in *Fission*, Eiko & Koma are seen to be coinhabitants of the desert landscape, sharing the space with the musicians. Clearly festival organizers saw something in this combination they wanted to feature.

That same combination puzzled dance critics when the dance first premiered; their view of Eiko & Koma as purely Japanese, even after they had spent fourteen years in the United States, seemed to prevent the critics from seeing the significance of Eiko & Koma's role in this particular *Land*. As discussed previously, the assumption of incomprehensibility often attends performances understood to be Japanese or Asian. A sort of Orientalist superficiality keeps the performance remote and exotic. Kishi and Bradshaw take a generous approach to this type of performance, suggesting that not being able to understand a theatrical performance linguistically allows a greater focus on nonverbal aspects of the performance.⁶⁷ Thornbury challenges this belief, arguing instead that when "productions are in Japanese, they are remote and exotic — and 'safe' to like. When they are in English, they become transgressive — and subject to critical disapprobation."⁶⁸ I would go even further to say that the English-language productions, or ones that draw attention to an American context, are no longer remote and exotic and therefore are simply no longer interesting. In other words, the pleasure of watching the "Japanese" performance is precisely in its remoteness and exoticism. Once something interrupts this distance, whether English in text-based performances or a recognizable context or situation in body-based performance, the source of the Orientalist pleasure is removed. This phenomenon was evident in critics' negative reception of Eiko & Koma's dances *Fluttering Black* and *Nurse's Song* (discussed in chapter 2), both pieces with strong associations with New York and American punk and hippie subcultures. I believe the same phenomenon was active in critics' reception of *Land*. Deborah Jowitt wrote of Eiko & Koma: "We attend their performance to be refreshed by simplicity, by essences, by the single burning gesture that sums up a moment, or an age, of living."⁶⁹ Although

she was not writing about *Land* in particular, her statement reveals the kinds of expectations that had accrued around Eiko & Koma's work. According to Jowitt, one attends Eiko & Koma's dances to enjoy a timeless, Zen-like quality, not to be challenged by pressing current issues.

Though Eiko & Koma were not present for the Festival of Asian/Asian American Dance panel discussion, many of the issues they repeatedly raised in the 1980s and 1990s were echoed by panelists Kumiko Kimoto (now known as Koosil-ja), Mel Wong, and Sun Ock Lee.⁷⁰ Moderator Peggy Choy, a longtime University of Wisconsin–Madison assistant professor, indentified in her opening remarks a tendency in American twentieth-century dance to borrow or invent dances that seem “Oriental,” with “no need to accurately represent Asian dance.” This tension between the lived experiences of Asian American dancers and representations and appropriations of their dancing is at the heart of the questions she posed to the panelists. Though the panelists varied in the extent to which they identified as Asian American, they all spoke about ways their dance was impacted by larger discourses of what it meant to be Asian or Asian American. Lee spoke of how she always was labeled with “the Korean tag,” not “the US tag,” despite her US citizenship. Wong spoke with deep frustration about how critics and funders viewed his work. Unable to recognize the Chinese aspects of his choreography because it was not “traditional,” Wong lamented, “they couldn’t see how I was breaking ground.” Kimoto, much like Eiko & Koma, made a plea for her work, not her identity, to be the focus. Grappling with her background as an ethnic Korean from Japan living in the United States, Kimoto said, “My art has my history, my contradictions, ambiguity, my complexity.” She felt that complexity was erased, however, when funders and presenters asked her to identify as one thing or another.

Eiko & Koma encountered many of the same issues articulated by the festival panelists. They disappeared from the *Bridge* Asian American dance roundtable because they were not connected to tradition, yet according to many dance reviews in the *New York Times* and other publications, Eiko & Koma were traditional because they were Asian. On the one hand they were too postmodern to be ethnic; on the other they were too ethnic to be postmodern. The butoh discourse acknowledged their postmodernity, but tied it to a primitive, prehistoric (and even pre-traditional) past. In none of these cases were Eiko & Koma presented

as Japanese/Americans living and raising a family in New York, gathering American concert dance accolades. Acknowledgment of how their lives in the United States and their experiences as transnational Japanese/Americans might influence the work they were making was lacking from all sides.

Asian/American Dance Studies

In the twenty years since the University of Wisconsin panel, scholars such as Yutian Wong, Priya Srinivasan, and SanSan Kwan have led the way in developing a body of literature on Asian American dance including early twentieth-century modern dancers, diasporic South Asian dancers from the late nineteenth century to the present, circuits of popular dancers on the “Chop Suey” circuit, and contemporary companies.⁷¹ The next generation of Asian and Pacific Islander American scholars is already contributing work on Filipino American hip-hop, contemporary hula, and other transnational dance practices.⁷² But even as the idea that dance participates in the construction of Asian American identity is further developed, issues raised in *Bridge* in 1978 and at the University of Wisconsin in 1994 about the inclusion of Asian Americans in dance and dancing Asian American identity are far from resolved. Palumbo-Liu’s assertion that the link between Asian and America is always up for (re)negotiation remains relevant. For example, in two 2014 blog posts *Dance Magazine* editor Wendy Perron muses about “Martha Graham and the Asian Connection” and “When Martha Got to Be Asian.”⁷³ Much like Chin’s article thirty-five years earlier, Perron’s first post observes a notable number of Asian dancers in Graham’s company and lists a number of singular performers, but without any sort of critical examination of Graham’s Orientalism or what it means to be an Asian or Asian American dancer in the United States today. Her second post takes former Graham dancer and current Dance Kaleidoscope artistic director David Hochoy’s drag appearances as Martha Graham to mean that Graham finally got her wish to be Asian, as if the fact of her appearance on his Asian American body made her so. Perron misses the opportunity to examine how Hochoy dressing as Graham might actually expose the deep history and continued workings of Orientalism in American modern dance.

While the larger discourse surrounding Japanese performance in the United States has moved on from butoh and the nuclear to the much-

discussed “cool Japan” of anime and manga,⁷⁴ butoh has been unable to rid itself of the nuclear discourse, as evidenced in the almost mythic repetition of the butoh-bomb association by dancers and audience members alike. Eiko & Koma have likewise continued to struggle to separate themselves from butoh (not to mention all the mystification that still adheres to “Japan”). It is not lost on me that even as Eiko & Koma distance themselves from butoh, they do actually engage with the atomic bomb and its legacy. As I argue in chapter 6, however, Eiko & Koma’s engagement with the atomic bomb constructs complex networks of complicity and shared experiences across time and continents, a level of complexity not admitted in the nuclear discourse surrounding butoh. Indeed, by taking the dances themselves as the starting point, the following four chapters attempt to demonstrate what Eiko & Koma’s choreography does, in addition to or in spite of what discourses tell us it does.