UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Categorizing *PAPER*: _____ (no need lah)

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

By Radhanath D. Thialan

Thesis Committee:
Assistant Professor Charlotte Griffin, Chair
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DEDICATION

To

Hiep Liang

For believing in me even when I did not.

My dad

For accepting and always supporting me for who I am.

The Malaysian Contemporary Dance Pioneers

For staying true to your roots, while founding contemporary dance in Malaysia today.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Categorizing *PAPER*: _____ (no need lah)

By

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Master of Fine Arts in Dance

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Assistant Professor Charlotte Griffin, Chair

Scholars and dance artists attempt to define, situate, and categorize the ethnographically and aesthetically complex arena of contemporary dance in Malaysia. Through an analysis of the existing literature, interviews with relevant experts, and the creation of *PAPER*[1], a new choreographic work, this thesis investigates the nature of contemporary dance in Malaysia, how it defies narrow characterization, and how I identify as a transnational Malaysian choreographer living abroad. Interviews with Malaysian contemporary dance artists, Mavin Khoo, Ramli Ibrahim, Anthony Meh, and Aman Yap, as well as Malaysian dance scholars, Joseph Gonzales and Leng Poh Gee, reveal the broad scope of contemporary dance in Malaysia and its unique cultural roots. With the creation of my thirty-minute contemporary concert dance work – *PAPER*, the connections between my personal heritage and contemporary dance aesthetics were further revealed. *PAPER* investigated the themes of power, creation, time, and destruction symbolized through the literal and imaginative use of shredded paper.

[1] View Appendix D at the end for title image.

“Contemporary dance in Malaysia is not just anything but something unique yet recognizable, something so close yet unreachable, something understandable yet questionable.”

Mumtaz Backer

INTRODUCTION

As a young dancer, I grew up in Malaysia learning Western dance forms such as ballet, jazz, and ballroom as well as traditional dances including Bharatanatyam classical Indian dance and Chinese classical dance. While studying contemporary dance forms abroad in the United States and Europe, I found that my national identity somehow intertwines with my dancing body. I suddenly become a physical representation of a "Malaysian contemporary dancer." When I mention that I am from Malaysia, I am often asked,

"Are you doing Malaysian contemporary dance?" or

"What is Malaysian contemporary dance like?"

These questions caught me by surprise. Is there a Malaysian essence in my movements or movement qualities? I feel distinctly Malaysian while abroad yet "not Malaysian enough" while in my home country which leads me to question where I stand as a contemporary choreographer studying and creating transnationally. These questions inspired me to expand my knowledge of my country's history and its contributions to the world of contemporary concert dance. Malaysian ethnochoreologist and ethnomusicologist Mohd Anis Md Nor, states that dance research is an important tool for self-discovery and can unearth building blocks for dance:

> […] Malaysian choreographers and dancers have engaged dance research to discover their roots, culture, heritage, and traditions as means to transfer and reconstruct their research findings in contemporary dance forms (Nor, *Dance* 2).

It is in this spirit that I focused my research on Malaysian dance history, critical dance studies, ethnochoreology, and performance studies, conducted interviews with Malaysian contemporary dance artists, and created a new concert dance. Through this research and artistic production, I hope to deepen my connection as a Malaysian-Chindian (a coined term in Malaysia referring to

people who are a hybrid of Chinese and Indian races) to "Malaysian contemporary dance" and to contextualize my emerging choreographic voice.

Of course, I immediately encountered challenges in my research. Both the terms "contemporary dance" and "Malaysian contemporary dance" are defined and employed in multiple and even contradictory ways. The more I read, the more I struggled to delineate contemporary dance. Luckily, I am not alone in questioning its broad scope as applied to concert dance in the twenty-first century. Scholar SanSan Kwan, Professor in the Department of Theatre at UC Berkeley, analyzes the temporality, geography, and commercialization of the art form in her article *When is Contemporary Dance?*. Malaysian scholar, Mumtaz Backer struggles to distinguish the folkloric and Western influences in contemporary movement vocabularies in her essay *Contemporary Dance in Malaysia: What Is It?*. The evidence confirms that contemporary dance in Malaysia is ethnographically and aesthetically fluid. The artists are hybrid bodies, working in hybrid forms, creating and performing within a distinct sociopolitical climate. Their works often lie between and beyond the currently accepted definitions of contemporary dance and resist binary classification, thus existing in Homi Bhabha's "third space" or Nasrullah Mambrol's "third hybrid species," which I further discuss in chapter one.

While my scholarly research often raised more questions than answers, the interviews I conducted with six Malaysian professionals in the field were affirming. These pioneers included internationally renowned performer, scholar, and academic Joseph Gonzales, contemporary choreographer and Labanotator Leng Poh Gee, famed Malay Odissi Dancer Ramli Ibrahim, rehearsal director of Akram Khan Company Mavin Khoo (a fellow Malaysian-Chindian), and founders of the contemporary dance company Dua Space Dance Theatre Anthony Meh and Aman Yap, who explore the cultural dynamics of the Malaysian-Chinese community. Across the

interviews, these artists pointed to contemporary dance as a concept or a state of mind capable of transcending identity, technique, or stylistic choice. These artists emphasized the significance of the Malaysian sociopolitical climate as a shaping influence in the contemporary dance scene. Each illustrated that a strong sense of self and a compassionate understanding who you are as a person are important first steps for a contemporary choreographer. The combined scholarly research and interviews highlighted the challenges and opportunities present in defining contemporary dance in Malaysia, connecting to cultural roots, and understanding my current status as a transnational choreographer.

It was in the creation of my thesis choreography *PAPER* that I was able to further process and express these findings. I called on the fabric of my upbringing which intertwines the various identities I carry within my multilingual, hybrid dancing body. *PAPER* is inspired by Goddess Kali, a Hindu goddess and one of the ten Mahavidyas; it was a play on the word PAPER which stands for Power, creAtion, Paper, timE, destRuction (Appendix D). Power: in the form of currency, money makes the world go around. Creation: identification documents provide proof of your existence. Time: mementos such as photographs, licenses, and certifications provide a chronological timeline of our life. Destruction: divorce papers, court orders, or even a simple parking ticket can create emotional chaos. Ironically, the work's premiere at the Experimental Media Performance Lab (xMPL) at UC, Irvine on April 10th and 11th, 2020, was ultimately destroyed by COVID-19.

The written thesis *Categorizing PAPER: _____ (no need lah)* calls into question the term "Malaysian contemporary dance;" *lah*[2] is an ending particle prevalent in the

[2] Cliff Goddard wrote a very detailed journal about the usage of the term *lah* in Malaysia and Singapore. The citation of the article is attached below if interested:

Malaysian colloquialism that, in this case, invokes a lighthearted acceptance of multiculturalism while increasing its saliency for the readers. In chapter one, I introduce Malaysia's geography, people, and dance history, as well as the sentiments of Malaysian dance scholars on contemporary dance in Malaysia. In the second chapter, I summarize the key points that emerged while interviewing the six Malaysian dance pioneers. In chapter three, I elaborate on the inspiration and creation of *PAPER* and examine whether the label of "Malaysian contemporary dance" is helpful or even necessary. This thesis respects all individual beliefs, religions, races, and embraces hybrid works to share my roots with the audience. Being a Malaysian contemporary choreographer, I relate to this thesis on a personal level as I discover my origins to construct my present. Concurrently, I dedicate this work to honor the Malaysian dance pioneers who have painted a vibrant choreographic image in Malaysia, rich with its native cultural elements.

Goddard, Cliff. "The Meaning of Lah: Understanding 'Emphasis' in Malay (Bahasa Melayu)." *Oceanic Linguistics*, vol. 33, no. 1, 1994, pp. 145–165., doi:10.2307/3623004.

CHAPTER 1: Roots

Geography, People, and Education

Contemporary dance in Malaysia is rooted in its geography, history, and people, as a result it interweaves indigenous, diasporic, and global voices. Malaysia is amongst the eleven countries in Southeast Asia and lies approximately 7º north of the equator. Its two noncontiguous regions: Peninsular/West Malaysia (Semenanjung Malaysia /Malaysia Barat) and East Malaysia (Malaysia Timur), located on the island of Borneo, are separated by the South China Sea. Malaya (now Peninsular Malaysia including the island of current Singapore) was colonized by Britain in 1786 and 1945 before gaining its independence on August 31, 1957. It was renamed Malaysia on September 16, 1963 when Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia) were included into the territories. Singapore then peacefully seceded from Malaysia in August 1965 (see Fig. 1) (Hooker 222).

Fig. 1 is a map of South East Asia (SEA) which shows its strategic geographical location, located in the center of SEA. Image downloaded from https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/South-China-Sea-political-map.htm.

Malaysia's strategic location in central South East Asia made it a center of international commerce and the subject of repeated colonization. Traders from India, China, Arab, Spain, Britain, and Portugal traveled to Malacca[3] during the spice trade as early as 300BC. As coffee, pepper, and silk traded hands, so did religious faith, political ideas, ethnic identities, and cultural practices – including dance. The introduction, establishment, censorship, and commingling of social activities produced the hybrid languages and bodies of Malaysians and added to the multiplicity of aesthetics and form that characterize Malaysian arts and culture today.

The major ethnic groups of Malaysia consist of the Malays (57%), Chinese (23.7%), and Indians (7.1%); the minorities in Malaysia are the indigenous groups (11%) and others (7.9%) (Koh 3). The Malays and indigenous groups are described as the *bumiputera*, which translates to the "sons of the soil," and are believed to be the natives of Malaysia (Koh 3). Malaysians may subcategorize themselves by their country of origin and ethnic heritage (e.g. Malaysian-Chinese or Malaysian-Indian) to avoid confusion. Malaysia's minor ethnic groups include Iban, Kadazan, Bidayuh, Chindian (Chinese and Indian), Mamak (Malay and Indian), Peranakan (Malay and Chinese "Baba" for males, "Nyonya" for females), and Eurasians (usually Portuguese and locals but now any Europeans and locals) (Koh 3-4). With distinct ethnic identities, come various religious affiliations. Even though Malaysia is considered a Muslim country with Islam as its governing majority, it allows the practice of other religions and power sharing in parliaments to fulfill the British demand for racial harmony before its independence (Hooker 208). However, "true multiculturalism" was not fully embraced after independence according to Hooker. In May 13, 1969, racial tensions for equal power between the Malays and the Malaysian-Chinese in Kuala Lumpur resulted in violent demonstrations leaving 177 dead and

[3] Malacca, now one of the thirteen states in Malaysia was one of the first state discovered in Malaysia. It was where the main port for maritime commerce was located.

5,750 imprisoned (Hooker 232). However, this racialized violence in the country was the exception. In my experience, Malaysians of diverse backgrounds live together harmoniously, and overt racism is not prevalent in day to day activities. The Malaysian Tourism Board promotes our multiculturalism with the slogan "Malaysia Truly Asia[4]" by celebrating distinct ethnic groups and cultural practices while embracing the idea of a unified Malaysian citizenry. According to dramaturg and dance researcher Lim How Ngean, this marketing omits Malaysia's nuanced hybrid or "third space" identities (Lim 53). The education sector also struggles with the "Malaysia Truly Asia" campaign. How does a country promote unity while preserving distinct ethnic identities without segregating the population by language and religion?

English and Malay are the primary languages, though many citizens speak multiple languages and dialects. Mandarin and Tamil were chosen as the "official" languages of the Chinese and Indian communities as "they were considered to be more easily understood regardless of the dialect subdivisions within the community" (Koh 4). To administer multilingual education, the ministry of education has different types of primary schools: National Schools, Vernacular Schools – sometimes known as ethnic schools (mostly Chinese and Tamil), Private schools and International schools. In primary level Vernacular Schools, an additional mother tongue language class is required. The support and existence of vernacular schools in Malaysia, according to researchers from the National University of Malaysia, stemmed from the different racial groups' fear of losing their respected culture and mother tongue (Tay). For instance, in Chinese schools, students take Chinese language class on top of Malay and English.

[4] According to Malaysia's Tourism Board, Malaysia's slogan, "Malaysia Truly Asia" captures and defines the essence of the country's unique diversity. It sums up the distinctiveness and allure of Malaysia that make it an exceptional tourist destination (Campaigns – Malaysia Truly Asia).

Some classes such as mathematics and sciences are taught bilingually in English and their ethnic language (Clark).

Tony Fernandez, a Portuguese-Malaysian-Indian entrepreneur who founded the budget airline company Air Asia disagrees with the segregated school system, because the majority of Chinese youth will be found in Chinese schools, Indians in Indian schools, and Malays in Malay schools (Sekolah Kebangsaan) (Gonzales, *Intercultural* 22). This could create an unconscious bias towards different cultures and ethnicities at a young age due to the lack of diversity in schools. Why not create an inclusive school system? Malaysian law student at the London School of Economics and Political Science Victoria Tay, challenged Fernandez's point of view stating that "while eradicating vernacular schools might be able to unify Malaysians of different ethnicities, the motivations and intent of this action must be unblemished from any racist origins" (Tay). Despite being a minority, I do not feel inferior towards other ethnic groups but rather, I embrace my "hybridity" and uniqueness. However, there are some minority groups that may feel isolated, racially stereotyped, and linguistically challenged especially in the vernacular school settings. Perhaps the government could look to dance education as a model for public schooling.

The Malaysian national dance scene and select educational models are more liberating. In my experience, pre-professional dance classes are taught in English, which sets a universal tone and welcomes people of all races and ethnicities. In higher education, the National Academy of Arts, Culture, and Heritage (ASWARA), implements a pioneering curriculum intended to preserve tradition while exploring contemporary ideas. All dancers are required to study broadly regardless of personal cultural roots and stylistic preferences. Gonzales explains that the dance

program in ASWARA[5], which is similar to Taipei National University of the Arts (TNUA), "incorporates all dance forms (selected traditional dances from each main cultural group in Malaysia, along with ballet, contemporary) into its curriculum and does not separate Ballet, Contemporary, Chinese Dance Majors, etc." (Gonzales). The ASWARA system requires Malaysian dance majors to learn traditional and Western dances, which expands their movement vocabulary and acts as an environment for hybridity. He concluded that this multicultural synthesis in higher dance education is what makes the dance scene unique. I asked Gonzales to further distinguish Malaysian contemporary dance from neighboring countries like China or India. His answer aligns with my personal viewpoint that the comparison is too vast as geographical placement and culture may play a big role.

> This question is almost impossible to answer as those countries are huge and so incredibly diverse too. For example, is Akram Khan's work British although he is originally from Bangladesh and is a kathak dancer/choreographer primarily? So, it brings about the question of nationality and borders. Nations are political constructs and never existed hundreds of years ago. So, do we need to be so focused or obsessed about this? Or perhaps more importantly for me, that people make good art that emerges from Malaysia, regardless of how it is perceived (Gonzales).

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Dancing Hybrids

Malaysian dance education is rooted in its vibrant multicultural dance history and "counterparts that of its citizens, consisting of streams of genres – each with its own path, history, and development" (Gonzales, Dancing 21). Malaysian dance history scholars attempt to acknowledge the origin of movement practices as well as the cultural trajectories that trace the

[5] Established in 1994, ASWARA is the only institution of higher education in the field of performing arts that is supported entirely by the Government of Malaysia under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism Malaysia.

lending and borrowing of dance techniques and philosophies (Intercultural 52). I agree with dance scholar Gonzales in his division of traditional dances in Malaysia according to the three major ethnic groups including the Malay, Chinese and India and termed the groups respectively: Traditional Malay Dance, The Trajectory of Chinese Dance, and Dances of the Indian Diaspora (Gonzales, Dancing 33). Traditional Malay Dance is recognized by its slow-paced yet intricate musical rhythm with the dance being a portrayal of the Malay customs and culture, to depict their way of life. The Chinese folk dances that can be found in Malaysia are the Lion/Dragon Dance and Fan Dance which continue to be modified by local Malaysian-Chinese. On the other hand, the classical Indian dances such as Bharatanatyam and Odissi have been kept close to their original traditions. Labeling these traditional dances and categorizing them by the three main ethnic groups helps trace the historical and aesthetic lineages of each. Ibrahim, with his professional expertise in Indian classical dance, challenges the term "diaspora" used in Gonzales's label of "Dances of the Indian Diaspora." Ibrahim explains that African dances are diasporic in the United States because they evolved on a different land while being geographically and culturally severed from their country of origin. Conversely, the Indian culture is embedded in the Malaysian culture and "the country has a close relationship [with India] artistically and the boundary is man-made" (Ibrahim).

As a result of British colonization, the Western dance form, Classical Ballet, was first introduced in Malaysia in the 50s by Irene Simms and Signe Syme, expatriate wives of British army personnel and plantation owners (*Intercultural* 71). Many ballet teachers in Malaysia follow the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD), and Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD) syllabus from the United Kingdom. Contemporary dance pioneers in Malaysia from the 1980s to early 2000s, made good use of these new influences. They created innovative hybrids

by combining dance vocabularies and patterns, using traditional movement motifs within contemporary compositions, or engaging in intercultural multi-ethnic collaborations. The Temple of Fine Arts, a well-known arts organization mainly focusing on Indian art forms made works like *Swan Lake* (1987)[6], a retelling of the familiar European story with Bharatanatyam steps and Indian classical music. *Butterfly Lovers* (2002)[7], a famous Chinese classical play was performed in the English language with an ethnically diverse cast. *Soraya Ballet* (1981)[8] , a three-act classical ballet of a Malay story with traditional cultural costumes was choreographed by Lee Lee Lan[9] , the founder of Federal Ballet Academy in Malaysia. This fruitful period brought forth a new image of dance in Malaysia that attracted media attention and national praise as it began to "oscillate between the local and the global" (Nor, *Dance Research* 2). These works represented a contemporary awakening in Malaysian artists in the 1980s. Only thirty years after independence, these multicultural dance performances contributed to a new national identity emphasizing and embracing the multiculturalism of the society.

Some scholars, like Bilqis Hijas, a current professor in the Dance Department of University of Malaya with an emphasis in dance criticism and history, raise the concern that this shift toward transculturation, assimilation, and globalization could dilute ethnic dance forms and ultimately Malaysian dance identities (Hijas 77). Modern dance educator, Leng, agrees noting that "with the introduction of ballet, traditional dances became less popular." A trend emerged in which younger generations pursued dance education abroad thus diminishing their interest in

[6] *TFA Swan Lake* 1987: 4 The Prince and the Swan, choreographed by Master Gopal Shetty: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzEAn55mU84&t=4s.
[7] *Butterfly Lovers* 2002, choreographed by Zhou Gui Xin and Si Jiu, narrated by Prakash Kandasamy: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nreuqtp0lX4&t=137s.
[8] Soraya Ballet, choreographed by Lee Lee Lan: (snippets from 14:25–14:55; more footages can be seen from 11:50 onwards) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ea4Pq14-GRo&t=950s.
[9] Lee Lee Lan studied ballet in London, and is the first Asian examiner for ballet, modern, and tap appointed by ISTD. She is also the president of The Dance Society where it holds annual ballet competitions in Malaysia. Read more about Lee Lee Lan at http://www.fab.net.my/our-principal.html.

Malaysian traditional dances and increasing their expertise in Western dance idioms (Hijas 77). There are social fetishizations of individuals that studied abroad; some artists who return from overseas present art that is of questionable quality, but gain "mystic status" through their international credentials (Hijas 73). Hijas claims that "the cultural cringe that persists after decolonization makes international credentials a requirement for local success," that a distinctive Malaysian identity in contemporary dance is yet to be forged and that dance hybrids raise concerns of cultural appropriation (73). Director of Mak Yong Titis Sakti (A Shakespearean-based Mak Yong Theatre), Norzizi Zulkafli[10], proposes five intercultural performance practices to promote inclusivity. They are as follows: cultural sensitivity, cultural belonging, aesthetic integrity, collaboration, and openness (Zulkafli, 8). Many Malaysian artists believe that this model champions diversity. From my perspective, this method of fusing forms and creating hybrids with intercultural sensitivity is a welcome and natural progression for concert dance in Malaysia. Our country is not the point of origin for Chinese folk dance nor Indian classical dance, we are the crossroads where multicultural dancing feet have met and intertwined. To advance our own national choreographic voice, we have the opportunity to dig deeply into singular ethnic practices or to paint broadly with many colored influences.

It is during this period of multicultural dance creation that terms such as "Malaysian contemporary dance" and "Contemporary Malaysian Dance" emerge. Are they appropriate? Mumtaz Backer, a Malaysian dance scholar and lecturer in the Drama and Theatre department at Universiti Sains Malaysia – Penang, states that there are two types of contemporary dance in Malaysia – "traditional contemporary dance, and modern contemporary dance" (Backer 64). She defines traditional contemporary dance as consisting of folkloric elements rooted in Classical

[10] Norzizi Zulkafli is a scholar that studies and combines Shakespeare and Malay dance art forms. She is very well known for her Shakespeare meets Mak Yong project in Malaysia.

Indian Dance, Malay Dance, and Chinese Classical and Folk Dance and modified for a proscenium stage and public performance. Modern contemporary dance involves international dancers trained in the lineages of classical ballet and modern dance. In the latter category, she identifies two groups. One emphasizes only Western ideas whereas the other fuses traditional Malaysian elements with modern dance (Backer 65) (see Fig. 2). By infusing traditional dances into the modern dance form, not only does it construct a new movement vocabulary, but also creates interest and awareness of the traditional form.

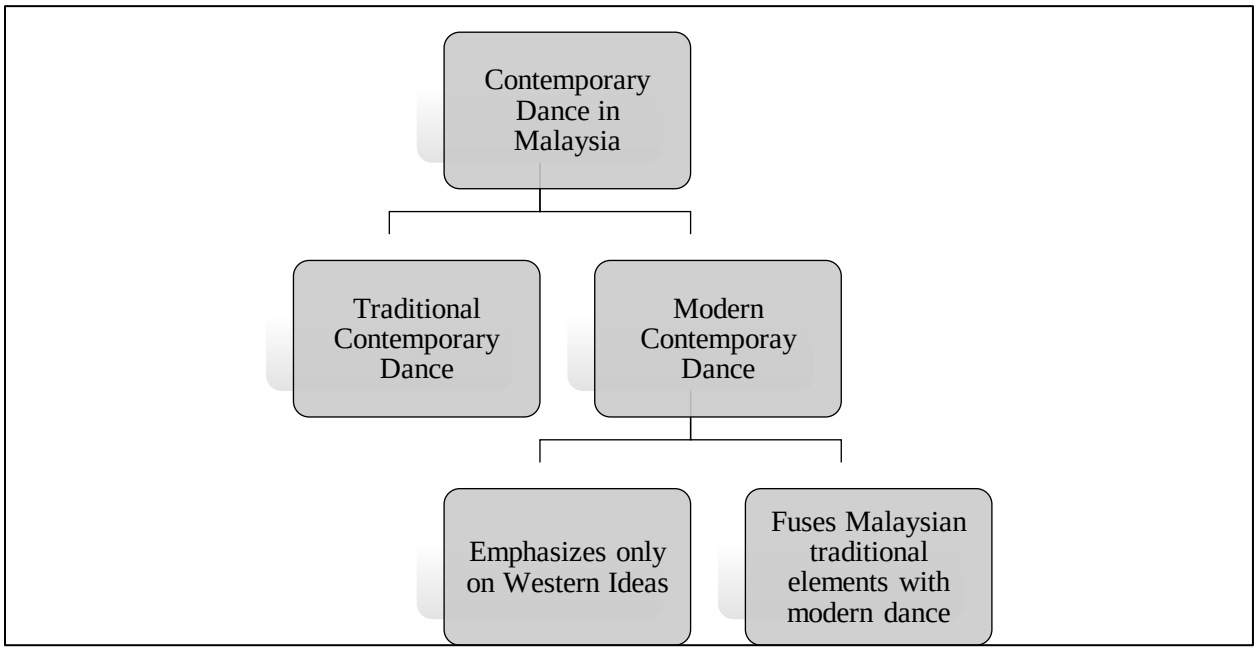

Fig. 2 helps visualise Backer's definition of Contemporary Dance in Malaysia.

Leaning towards an anthropological view, ethnochoreologist and ethnomusicologist, Nor, investigated works by four choreographers of different generations and ethnicity in his essay – *Dance Research: Transference and Reconstruction in Contemporary Malaysian Dance*. He provided detailed analysis of the traditional forms that informed contemporary vocabularies, such as the *zapin sindang*, choreographed by East Malaysian artist Ramli Ali, which he reconstructed in (1984) from Malay *zapin* in the village of Sindang.

> The *morphokines*[11] of *zapin sindang* such as *nayan* (slowness of movements), *longlai* (swaying of arms), *menyiku* (bending of elbows) are deconstructed further to locate the *kinemes* that initiated these movements (*Dance Research* 13).

The works analyzed by Nor exemplify Backer's category of traditional contemporary dance.

For the average Malaysian audience member, I believe that the costuming, make-up, and aesthetic presentation of traditional Malay, Chinese, and Indian dances are more significant ethnic identifiers than distinct folkloric steps (see Fig. 3-5). Malaysians are accustomed to seeing traditional garments during the many annual religious festivals. When transposed from the street to the stage, the cultural association remains. However, a work could employ traditional costuming yet meet the criteria of Backer's "modern contemporary dance." Backer acknowledges that her categories cannot define all of contemporary dance in Malaysia or keep up with its rapid and constant evolution. I agree.

While I recognize components of my choreography in Backer's classification of "modern contemporary dance" in Malaysia, it seems her subcategories are blurry. Her term "traditional contemporary dance" and the subcategory of "modern contemporary dance," bleed into each other. An example is demonstrated in Figure 3 and Figure 4. Dancers in Figure 4 are dressed with full traditional Indian costumes and make-up performing contemporary steps with hints of traditional movements, whereas this section from *Ancient Artifacts* in Figure 3 is choreographed with only traditional vocabulary but strips away the traditional outfit to feature contemporary costume designs. How are they able to fit into one category or the other? Dance critique, John Steven Moses, concluded his review for Dua Space Dance Theatre's *The Tree* with this beautiful endnote:

[11] "A *morphokines* is the smallest unit that had meaning in the structure of the movement system, and that could not be divided without changing or destroying that meaning (Kaeppler, *Dance and* 52)" (*Dance Research* 4).

To me, one could only appreciate the traditional dance in its purest form. Everything else becomes new and modern and could not withstand the test of time and societal changes. Henceforth, as The Tree tries to be new at many levels, it lacks the gravity to sustain the intricacies of the traditional forms (Moses).

Fig. 3. Dua Space's 《万象甲骨》 (*Ancient Artifacts*) used Water Sleeves found in Chinese Classical Dance elements as part of their costume to symbolize the art of calligraphy. Photo: Dua Space Dance Theatre.

Fig. 4. Odissi On High - Boundless Verve & Audacity by Sutra Foundation and Rudrakshya Foundation. Dancers are wearing costumes with elements of Indian classical dances. Photo: Sutra Foundation.

Fig. 5. *The Tree* by Dua Space Dance Theatre. Dancers dressed up in costumes that referred to and inspired by the Ibans (a group of minorities in Malaysia's Borneo Island). Photo: Dua Space Dance Theatre.

Backer further asserts that the 1990s saw the "Renaissance of the contemporary dance in Malaysia," because artists at that point have both Eastern and Western training in dance technique. In her essay – *Contemporary Dance in Malaysia: What is it,* Backer thanked the "dynamic individuals who sowed a Malaysian vision deep into the roots of contemporary dance" (68). Backer's thoughtful research attempts to clarify the many pronged tines of traditional and global influences piercing the fabric of contemporary choreography. In the careful consideration of her proposed definitions, I realize that "Malaysian contemporary dance" is not limited to a "distinct cross-cultural syncretic facility" (Hijas 87) and is, perhaps, beyond classification.

Dance Anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler discusses ways we categorize dance in *The Mystique of Fieldwork* (1999). She emphasized that similar terms may mean different things to different social groups. Kaeppler explains that:

> We usually understand the construction of categories used in our own culture and language, but often apply our categories to "others." For example, categorizing the movement dimensions of a religious ritual as "dance" can easily lead to misunderstanding across, and even within, cultures (*The Mystique* 14).

According to dance scholar and choreographer Ramli Ibrahim, the term "modern," though widely used, may be interpreted differently in Malaysia than in Europe and America (Ibrahim, *Indigenous* 25). Some Malaysian artists produce works that may aesthetically look "traditional," but are described as "contemporary" from a contemporaneous context of time and place. They would argue that performing dance with traditional elements on a proscenium stage with recorded music would be considered "contemporary." Performance studies scholar SanSan Kwan, suggests that the "contemporary dance" term benefits from further contextualization (49). Similar to Backer, she attempts to clarify the contemporary dance genre by denoting three subcategories: contemporary concert dance, contemporary commercial dance, and contemporary

world dance (Kwan 40-44). She acknowledges the inherent complexity of these categories while musing on a need for a further sub-genre of "Asian Contemporary Dance," which:

> […] can include a spectrum of intercultural dance work, from primarily Western contemporary choreography with trappings of Asian-ness to various fusions of Western movement vocabularies and structures with Asian energetic principles and gestural languages. (Kwan 45).

I do not disagree with her generalization but believe that it is more than just gestures; besides what does "Asian-ness" look like? There are various ethnicities in the continent of Asia and it is bold to claim that if a movement doesn't look Western, it could be Asian. In this delimiting process, she acknowledges that the latter is a "highly general category" (Kwan 45). In reflection to Malaysia's natural habitat (which consists of a mélange of ethnicity and culture), some performances in Malaysia can be seen as a fusion of Kwan's categorizations of contemporary. For instance referring back to Figure 3, Dua Space's *Ancient Artifact* included movements from Chinese Water Sleeves and Limón Technique which could be very difficult to categorize. Figure 4 shows Ibrahim's most recent premier – *Odissi on High*[12], where he incorporated Western influences such as dancers being lifted, partnered, and even lying flat on the floor into his Odissi work (CCBA). This could fit into Backer's subgenre of "modern contemporary dance" but it overlaps Kwan's definition. Having such diversity in the dance world of Malaysia poses a challenge to scholars aiming to delimit the contemporary dance genre.

Some scholars avoid the problematic discourse of labels altogether. Instead of classifying, they provide overviews, descriptions, and concepts of constructing contemporary dance in Malaysia. Ibrahim's essay on *Indigenous Ideas and Contemporary Fusions: The Making of Malaysian Contemporary Dance,* provides sociological examples of artists that fused

[12] *Odissi on High*, choreographed by Ramli Ibrahim: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rYCPh-J3KU&t=971s.

indigenous concepts into contemporary art making in dance and theatre of Malaysia. Instead of categorizing dance genres, he identified sociopolitical issues, government support, and financial struggles that Malaysian contemporary artists are facing in the creation of contemporary dance which will be discussed in chapter two. While researching Malaysia's dance history and scholarly definitions of Malaysian contemporary dance, I encountered postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha's concept of *hybridity* and began to explore its relevance to the dance scene in Malaysia.

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Defining Hybridity

Contemporary dance in Malaysia is unique because the artists are of hybrid bodies, working in hybrid forms, living in hybrid cultures, while creating and performing in a distinct sociopolitical climate. This observation aligns with postcolonial discourse and studies in the areas of cultural hybridity and interstitial or third spaces as sites for negotiating and subverting the hierarchical "othering" of binary colonial thinking. Bhabha, an internationally renowned Indian scholar, is widely recognized for his concept of hybridity. In his book *The Location of Culture,* Bhabha states that there is a space "in-between the designations of identity" and that "this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha 5).

In most cases, the third space would be the in-between spaces of two different things (picture a Venn diagram). However, I elaborated Bhabha's third space as seen in Figure 6. I break it down like this: (1) People from other countries migrated to Malaysia; (2) A new

multicultural society is formed; (3) British colonized Malaysia where they asserted their perceived cultural superiority over the "alien territory"; (4) After gaining its independence, Malaysia is in its third space where hybridity blossomed when there is a cultural exchange between the colonized and the colonizer.

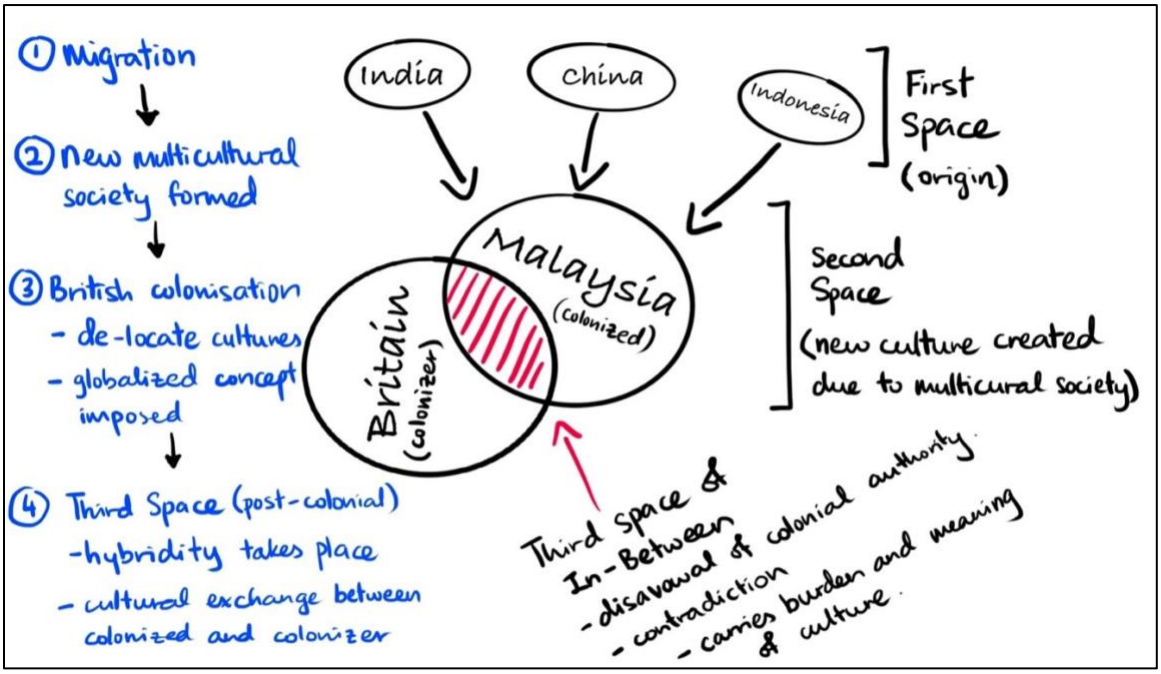

Fig. 6 demonstrates my understanding of Bhabha's "Third Space Epistemology" in Malaysia. Hand drawn on Procreate by Radhanath Thialan.

Some scholars have a different approach to the concept of hybridity. Literary theory and criticism scholar, Nasrullah Mambrol, asserts that in horticulture, the term hybridity "refers to cross-breeding of two species by grafting or cross-pollination to form a third, 'hybrid' species" (Mambrol). The third, "hybrid species" refers to the "creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization" (Mambrol). English and cultural studies scholar and critic, Antony Easthope, argues that the term hybridity indicates "an individual having access to two or more ethnic identities," and is best understood in its adversarial definition, that is, what is not hybridic (341-342). He also believes that the term hybridity is essentially Derrida's concept

of *difference* applied to colonialist text; which is hard to be implied if the definition in itself is not fixed. Bhabha's hybridity has been widely criticized, as it could denote "negating and neglecting the imbalance and inequality of power relations" between the colonized and the colonizer (Mambrol). For me, this term as defined by Easthope and Mambrol resonates with the Eastern and Western influences during the Renaissance Contemporary dance period in Malaysia. It could describe the synthesis in Malaysia's multicultural society that occurs when artists access two or more ethnic identities to create something new. Or as Mambrol puts it, to create a "third hybrid species." Aman Yap explained it like this, "we are Malaysians and we are automatically hybrid bodies because I am not Chinese from China, I am Malaysian-Chinese and that is my culture and identity. I am sharing my identity through my dancing body."

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Scholars provide varied perspectives on the trajectory and categorization of "Malaysian contemporary dance." The pioneering Malaysian "contemporary" choreographers in the 80s created nationally distinct works by fusing Indian, Chinese, and Malay traditional forms with Western ballet and modern idioms. Perhaps the term "Malaysian contemporary dance" could chronologically denote this period, followed by the "Renaissance" in the 1990s to early 2000s to indicate the emergence of versatilely trained dancers. Since 2000, the cross pollination has continued as dance makers and performers blur the line between ethnic identities and cultural practices to embrace a broader understanding of choreographic hybrids in Malaysia. Reflecting on this conundrum, Meh explains that you will not find an equivalent interstitial hybrid dance space in China, Indonesia, Taiwan or other neighboring countries and that its complexity is

unique to the soil of Malaysia (Meh). His latest choreography for his company has costumes inspired by *Batik,* a Malay traditional fabric wax art, with Chinese and Indian elements sewn into one piece. The choreography itself involves elements from three distinct ethnographic cultures to signify a contemporary expression of the Malaysian experience (see Fig. 7). The hybrid costumes, choreography, and performers themselves are identifiers of divergent cultural roots that intersect in Malaysia, Backer describes it as "something unique yet recognizable."

Fig. 7 *The Poems of Shading Leave*[13] by Dua Space Dance Theatre (left). This section represents Anthony Meh's vision of a Phoenix, relating to his cultural reference which symbolizes hope, birth, and freedom performed by Kenny Leow. The costume was an inspiration to the Malaysian-Indian peacock dance shown with a performer wearing a peacock feathered fan[14]. According to Meh, the *Batik* prints on the Phoenix's tail harmonizes designs of different cultures in Malaysia.

In linguistics, the Malaysian slang could be a distinct ethnographic identifier based on our English speaking accents. I am fluent in three languages: English, Mandarin, *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay). As a Malaysian choreographer, my work incorporates the myriad global languages of

[13] Full video of dancefilm by Dua Space Dance Theatre, *The Poems of Shading Leaves*, can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wo-qWL97urE&t=1s
[14] Image purchased on Alamy Stock Photos, taken on May 24th, 2008, in Malaysia.

ballet, jazz, modern, ballroom, and contemporary forms as well as folkloric dances rooted in my homeland and inspired by my Malaysian culture and experiences. I am slowly accepting that in this globalized world, categories can be confusing and being an individualist may be for the better. Am I a Malaysian contemporary choreographer? Does this matter in the creation and perception of my work? Should the title be "*PAPER:* A work by Radhanath Thialan"? While deepening my understanding of my country's diasporic, indigenous, and multicultural roots, the artistic impacts of colonization and globalization, and the scholarly definitions of contemporary dance, I also learned from the wisdom of Malaysian pioneers in the field. In the following chapter, I discuss the sociopolitical impacts and conceptual thinking that these artists identify as significant shaping influences on the current state of the art form.

CHAPTER 2: Branches

When I asked Artistic Director and Principal Dancer of Dua Space, Aman Yap, "What Makes Contemporary Dance in Malaysia Different?," he turned it around and asked my perspective as a "transnational" artist. I responded:

> Contemporary dance in Malaysia is unique by itself due to its multicultural society, therefore Malaysian artists can be more open minded due to the environment we live in. For instance, we do have streets with mosques, Buddhist temples, Hindu temples, and churches side by side and most Malaysians embrace each other's differences. With this open mind, we learn about other religions and cultures and celebrate multi-ethnic festivals which broaden our horizon in many ways.

Yap nodded, then proceeded to say that it is true to a certain extent, but since our country is governed by Muslims, there is bias. However, Rehearsal Director of Akram Khan Company, Mavin Khoo, whom is a Malaysian-Chindian, recalled his father's words: "There is nothing stronger than the body as it is inscribed with histories," and continued by asking me during the interview if it is necessary to categorize contemporary dance based on my birth country.

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Ethno-religious Social Status and Contemporary Dance in Malaysia

Jacques Derrida, an Algerian-born French philosopher, related multiculturalism closely to his theory of deconstruction. Derrida suggested that power structures come in pairs: one weak, the other strong (Bielskis 42). "Deconstruction" and "Power" play a big role in the postcolonial Malaysian multicultural society. To my understanding, Derrida's earlier claim to a "peaceful" multicultural society was to provide the "weak" (in this context refers to the non-*bumiputeras*)

with more rights. This theory was heavily criticized and created more injustice by simply providing privilege to the less privileged (Bielskis 45). Derrida later revised his theories to claim that "multicultural constitutionalism and the spirit of listening are the only solutions if people want to live in peace," being more sensitive to each other's *ethos* (Bielskis 50). Despite the fault in Derrida's earlier theory, there may be certain merits as demonstrated by the Malaysian economic system – New Economic Policy (NEP). The *bumiputeras* (indigenous Muslim Malays) were provided with economic privileges over other ethnicities with the intention to reach a more balanced society (Milne 235). "It was decided *bumiputeras* should control 30 percent of all corporate equity by 1990. Malay home buyers were entitled to a discount of 5 to 15 percent on new developments" (Chin). This policy, according to Yap, makes it harder for minority's voices to be heard. Mavin Khoo, also added that "[…] what is frustrating for me is the level of potential that is in Malaysia, but the reality of the socio-economic and political context that still prevents it from reaching where it should be." Malaysian-Chinese choreographer, Anthony Meh, was thrilled to return to Malaysia to launch a professional dance company after accomplishing his international career, only to realize that his naïve love for the country was not reciprocated. He struggled for more than twenty years to establish his dance company Dua Space in Malaysia. Meh speculates that the obstacles have to do with his Malaysian-Chinese ethnicity.

With Malaysia's population dominated by Muslims, the Sharia (Islamic religious law) has jurisdiction over all Muslims in Malaysia and its governance affects the funding, promotion, and censorship of the performing arts. It was not until September of 2019 that the almost twenty-eight-year ban of Mak Yong, Wayang Kulit (shadow puppet), and other Malay traditional dances was lifted because the origin of the dances did not meet the requirements and guidelines of the Sharia Law (Abdullah). It was banned in Kelantan, the state in Malaysia where it was born. In

2012, Singapore Dance Theatre's performance in Malaysia was banned for presenting ballet in tights and was deemed "costume indecency" (O'Callaghan). This incident created an opportunity for artists to stand up and educate the public. Their advocacy was successful because the ban was lifted and was asserted as a "miscommunication" during the approval process (Lai). This disconnection, corruption, and nepotism, and result in the loss of artistic productivity as more Malaysian artists leave than return (Hijas 75).

Ramli Ibrahim, a Malay-Muslim-Malaysian choreographer, is a world-renowned dancer of Odissi, a classical Indian and religiously Hindu dance form. Ibrahim's commitment to create and perform works outside of his heritage is a bold move for an individual guided by Sharia or Islamic law. From one perspective, Ibrahim is able to promote Indian dance and has successfully "elevated it to a national stage where other 'races' could be exposed to it" (Willford 44). He expanded the audience of Indian dance to include the more liberal Malay-Malaysians that look past race and religion. On the other hand, Malay fanatics felt offended by Ibrahim's devotion to Odissi and his performances telling stories of Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Ibrahim has not received significant governmental funding unlike other artists of his ethnicity and *bumiputera* status[15] (*Intercultural* 120). Gonzales wrote in *Attendance*, an annual dance magazine, regarding Ibrahim's thoughts and feelings on this matter:

> […], Malaysia was undergoing the wave of fundamentalist Islamic movement which was also sweeping this part of the world. Somehow, I managed to succeed as a professional Muslim male engaged in two Indian temple dance forms, in spite of the adverse environment. I did not have much support and had to rely on audience attendance (*Intercultural* 120; qtd in Annual 2007-8, 8).

Ibrahim being a Muslim male performing Odissi on the world stage without any lawsuits would be considered tremendously forgiving by the Malaysian Muslims despite the strict Sharia Law.

[15] Aspects of *bumiputera* status will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

Another example of the complex ethno-religious and sociopolitical factors impacting contemporary choreographers was described by Malaysian-Chinese artist Meh. He shared his story about his first national choreographic experience in Malaysia after returning from New York and dancing with Cloud Gate Dance Theatre (Taiwan). He was invited by the Malaysian government to choreograph a dance but was told to only use a red fan as the prop. Meh was astonished and confronted the officials about the red fan, to which they stated (with respect) that this is the prop the Chinese ethnicity uses in their dances. Meh accepted the offer with an open mind and pardoned their ignorance. "When I was choreographing, I was crying at the same time, to all the other cultures in Malaysia being stereotyped by the government." Despite the limitation, he creatively portrayed additional elements of his Chinese cultural identity including a dragon in the dance. "I titled this work *Longevity* as I wish our cultural identity in this country will expand and live despite these stereotypes." He emphasized that this is not about Malaysia, but the people who govern it. Ironically, the work was so well-received by the officials that it was asked to be performed at *Dataran Merdeka* (Malaysia's Independence Square), during the succession of our monarch. "I am very confused by how this work was perceived as it was supposed to be a mourning towards the different ethnicities of the country often being stereotyped by the government" (Meh). Even though *Longevity* has a strong Malaysian-Chinese cultural identity demonstrated in the work, Meh's intention was not to make a Malaysian-Chinese contemporary dance. It was because of the circumstance of the moment that he felt compelled to use this opportunity to make a dance inspired by his cultural identity. Another well-received work by Meh was *Anak Malaysia* (Children of Malaysia) inspired by when "Zakir Naik[16] asked Malaysian-Chinese to go back to China" (Meh).

[16] Zakir Naik is a Islamic televangelist from India, who is barred from giving any public talks and preaching in Malaysia under anti-hate and anti-terrorists laws.

Despite the sociopolitical stereotyping and suppression of cross-cultural works, the trend persists. Ibrahim stated that "the works in the last twenty years have given birth to a distinctive Malaysian identity in contemporary dance" and claimed that Malaysian contemporary choreographers are consciously informed by the rich and diverse indigenous traditions (*Indigenous* 23) despite the sociopolitical consequences. Artists that synthesize these cultural intersections are preserving and advancing folkloric traditions, creating new contemporary paths, and resisting political oppression. *PAPER* comments on political corruption from various aspects in the world today and no matter how much I try to separate it out, it is there, and it shows in my work. The bravery of the artists I interviewed encouraged me to accept and welcome these influences into my work. "Your culture is inherited in you no matter where you go and it may evolve as you grow, but never forget your roots (Meh)." After this discussion, I consider that my Malaysian-ness is a potent qualifier in my choreographic place in this world.

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Mindset of the Malaysian Society towards (Contemporary) Dance

Meh asserted that the biggest difference in contemporary dance in Malaysia is not stylistic choices, but the mindset of the people who often object to contemporary dance as a viable profession. He noted that parents may send their children to dance classes and pay a lot of money for ballet examinations, but discourage their children to make this "extra-curricular" activity a career. He has spent over twenty years hoping to convince Malaysian parents that "dance is so rich in culture [as] it really makes an individual a better human being," but has had

little success. Meh, with his company – Dua Space Dance Theatre[17], has held multiple outreach programs and various national and international performances to prove to Malaysian parents that contemporary dance teaches their children to discover life through art. The creative skill developed would aid in the children's mental growth and allow them to observe life through a philosophical lens (Meh).

Khoo continued Meh's point by saying, "most of us that fought through it are so passion driven because most parents will not support a full artist career." Khoo also contradicted himself as he has a love-hate relationship with this dynamic. He said he dislikes it because it is a struggle for artists to grow and strive through dance in Malaysia, but due to this barrier people really dance for the love of dancing.

> […] We have a festival that Akram and I created in Sadler's Wells every year of Indian dance – Darbar festival, and this year I'm […] curating the boys from Temple of Fine Arts. It is very interesting [to me] because even though it is not a professional company they […] dance every day for 6-7 hours just for the love of it and through that, there's something else that has come out […] in their dancing that is actually missing a lot in professional companies. So, I said that I kinda contradict myself a bit because I love the fact actually in Malaysia that there's no structure in some ways because I see the purity of intention in all, most of the dancers that I meet there. They just love to dance; they can work as a doctor and go straight and practice from 8pm – 2am and then go to work […] you know that's quite amazing. And I miss that here in the West actually (Khoo).

Khoo pointed out that the most popular serious training in Malaysia was Indian classical dance despite being in a Muslim country:

> Historically, Indian classical dance was the most vibrant in terms of serious dance training. Because ballet training was always kind of only after school […] [where] all girls took before they started A levels and then they all stopped. You know, and that was it. And Malay dance was originally […] very rural based, […] they didn't come to the cities that much (Khoo).

[17] Dua Space Dance Theatre is one of the first professional contemporary dance companies that is able to hire full-time dancers in Malaysia. Anthony Meh and Aman Yap could have built a name for themselves overseas but decided to establish in their home country instead. The two of them built up this company from scratch with no government support in Malaysia.

Indian classical dance is taken more seriously compared to other traditional dances in the city of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital. Most practitioners still dance while working in other professions and having families of their own. This tradition then passes on to the next generations, hence there are more classical Indian dancers than ballet, Malay, Chinese or contemporary dancers in Malaysian society (Khoo).

These interviews bring to my attention that despite being in a Muslim-majority country, the Malaysian dance scene is culturally diverse. Regardless of race or religion, aspiring Malaysian dance professionals learn the dances of multiple ethnic cultures. It is to my surprise that my thesis cast reflect my "Malaysian-ness" representing diverse cultures and speaking multiple languages. English, Mandarin, Japanese, Tagalog, Italian, and Spanish can be heard in a spoken word section of the performance. Describing the Malaysian mindset towards dance, Khoo mentioned "love and hate," and I am not sure whether to laugh or cry with these conflicting thoughts. I aim to create good art that overcomes familial and cultural opposition to professional dance pursuits. In doing so, if Meh and Khoo are accurate, I would develop a persistence, passion, and creativity that is essential to excelling as a contemporary dance artist in or from Malaysia.

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From Concept to Presence

Meh compared three different dance styles that he mastered through the years. He stated that "ballet is a body training system, classical Chinese dance is a form/bearing, folk is something that is passed down, and contemporary dance is a concept." He interprets Martha

Graham's contraction as a concept derived from a mother giving birth; Doris Humphrey's fall and recovery as an investigation of basic bodily mechanics; and Merce Cunningham's chance operations as a playful approach to creation and performance (Meh). Meh also indicated that, "every dance I choreographed looks 'new' because it is unique to the concept itself. There is not necessarily a style to conform into." Yap shared similar ideas saying that "ballet is a technique, traditional dance is an aesthetic, and contemporary dance is a concept." Contemporary dance happens because of the personal connection with the concept. Meh, from experience, said that the creation of contemporary dance is almost like giving birth, you are crying in pain, but you are so happy at the end and, as most mothers would, you take good care of the creation regardless of the outcome. Ibrahim supports this individualistic view and truly dislikes uniformity. He bemoans the homogenizing effect of globalization and emphasizes that contemporary dance makers must understand their personal expression of "contemporary." Cutting and pasting labels without understanding has no value in his mind.

Due to his international recognition in dance and having taught and performed worldwide, Khoo expressed that he is less concerned with labels and provided two outlooks for contemporary dance. He gave an "industry answer" versus an "artist answer." From an industry perspective, "[contemporary dance is] something that is not ballet, and it is something that, they would say [is] more creative, more imaginative, and more current" (Khoo). He claims this "contemporary" label facilitates funding and public understanding. From an artistic perspective, he echoes the detachment of the genre from aesthetics or tradition and describes contemporary dance as a "state of mind." Khoo coached classical ballet dancers Alina Cojocaru and Tamara Roja, who he defines as contemporary in the way they think about and approach ballet movements. "May it be [performing] Don Quixote or Swan Lake… [they are] so in the moment

because their state of mind is so current (Khoo)." He also ended by saying that he had seen contemporary dancers who are dated because their state of mind is not in the present (not in the sociocultural now). It is their approach to creating or performing an action that makes their state of mind "contemporary." Khoo's example connected very closely to a Pina Bausch quote that is close to my heart, she states:

> To understand what I am saying, you have to believe that dance is something other than technique. We forget where the movements come from. They are born from life. When you create a new work, the point of departure must be contemporary life – not existing forms of dance.

After listening to the interviews, I have come up with an analogy – contemporary dance is like water being able to mold itself to differently shaped bottles. Just like water, you must be flexible, adaptable, and able to conform to any given form. However, you must first believe that you are water.

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From the Personal to the Global – Dance DNA. Personal Identity, and Globalization

According to Professor from University of Wisconsin-Madison, Dr. Sami Schalk, consciousness is entwined with identity and is the binary of self and other (Schalk 197). When asked to compare their Dance DNA[18] (a term coined by dance studies scholar Jennifer Fisher to refer to the part of a person's identity made up of their dance training and experiences, borrowing

[18] Dance DNA is a term coined by dance studies scholar Jennifer Fisher to refer to the part of a person's identity made up of their dance training and experiences, borrowing the scientific term "DNA" and using it metaphorically. The idea is that every person, throughout their lives, absorbs influences and experiences from dance specifically and develops expertise and preferences that becomes part of who they are--that's their Dance DNA. Dance DNA may or may not overlap with other aspects of one's identity, and is part of culture, the things you learn in a lifetime, not biology, things you are born with, or nationality, labels you are assigned by a government.

the scientific term “DNA” and using it metaphorically) and personal identities, the six interviewees expressed no separation between the two. Responses such as “intermingled” and “self” were used. According to them, cultural identity is not something they consciously think about for inclusion into their choreography, but it is rather something that is embedded in their physical self. These artists mentioned that they do not cogitate of making a work about Malaysia or plan to portray cultural identity in their work but at the end, the cultural identity and personal identity unfold themselves in the works organically. Gonzales mentioned that it is not intentional for him to portray cultural identity in his works but because his national identity is important to him, his works often reflect that. Yap and Meh mentioned that because they are Malaysians residing in Malaysia, their works are often a reflection of the happenings in Malaysia.

Meh agreed that our personal identity often amalgamates our Dance DNA but reminded me during the interview that there is no final answer to this question because in life, we change and grow through time. “You should definitely embrace changes, as only through growth comes discovery, we find new things and that creates a different experience” (Meh). He gave an example of Tai Chi where there is often a push and pull action, but without our physical and mental self being the initiator, there is no action. Yap believes that it does not matter what movement comes out as long as you are being true to yourself. This philosophical sense of self is also important to Khoo. He expressed that one’s dance identity and personal identity should never be separated:

> Now there are few of us like Akram and I who really do not believe in [the separation] because[…][the connection of Dance DNA and personal identity] is missing a lot when I go to see performances now, I see a lot of performers doing their job very well, but I’m not seeing anymore the depth of artistry of someone coming on stage and really sharing their personal history/story/life through the work. It is something much more transcendental. So, I don’t think I have a separation and I actively […]at this point in my

> career […] choose not to have that separation because I don't believe in it.

Khoo mentioned that a good dancer does not need to have the best technical ability but must be culturally informed and connected to his/her inner self and uses the body as a form of expression. This results in a more engaging presence and better serves the dance (Khoo). Khoo explained:

> I can put on a *baju melayu* and *songkok*, or a *kulta*, or whatever and I can stand in front of you […]and you'll go ok, he's Malaysian. Or, I can take them all off and just stand in front of you, and just show you who I am, who happens to also be Malaysian. I don't have to do anything in my work to prove the Malaysian-ness because my body is on stage already and there's nothing stronger.

Khoo's perception of identity relates closely to the identity theory of Carl Jung where he stated that "the individual is the only reality" (Jung 58). Similarly, Jiří Kylián revealed that "now every artist is an individualist. There is no common style under which you can put all the artists creating today" (Kylián 11). It helps me understand why some Malaysian dance scholars fear globalization and transnationalism. They are concerned these trends may "de-historicize" and "de-culturalize" the Malaysian dance identity (Hijas 86). English philosopher and writer, Roger Scruton, mentioned that folk culture is now extinct as globalization has replaced the inheritance of folk cultures with the "commercialized mish-mash" (Scruton 3). Scruton continued by stating that:

> Modern people may be charmed by folk costumes, folk dancing, and folk festivals; but they do not find their identity through these things – which is another way of saying that folk culture is dead (3).

As a transnational artist connecting to my roots while accepting global influences, I argue that folk culture is not dead. The "commercialized mish-mash" is in fact the new dance of the people.

As I relate my personality to my Dance DNA as a Malaysian choreographer, I see that they slowly come together like a "reverse mitosis" as I mature in the art form. A few years ago, I

realized that I tend to follow certain dance trends when I choreograph. I shuddered with embarrassment looking back at those works, realizing that they lack comprehensive research, understanding of my roots, and honesty in my own choreographic voice. It is unique to Malaysia's ethnographic complexity that to be "honest" requires a multiplicity of movement vocabularies (Meh). If a Malaysian contemporary choreographer does not know the Malaysian culture, how can one represent contemporary dance in Malaysia? The more authentic you are as an individual, the more authentic a contemporary choreography will be. To clarify, Khoo explained:

> It really is about being honest with your personal voice. All my work has always been a bit queer for sure, because naturally that's just [going to] come out of me and it's always been slightly transcendental, where there's an ambiguity between something a bit spiritual and something very sensuous. These are all qualities that are naturally me. I am not going to suddenly make a piece about Cuba. So, I think that is. Ah! Honesty is very important (Khoo).

I have always heard that an individual has to be honest in order to create original work, but never have I really understood what honesty in dance creation meant until this research. I realized that there is no need to force any Malaysian elements into the work to represent myself as a Malaysian choreographer and trying to label my work as "Malaysian contemporary dance." Khoo echoed Hijas's and Ibrahim's fear of globalization by saying that many young choreographers are trying to fit in, hence, they create contemporary works that have similar and often commercial aesthetics. Through my experience, I am able to affirm this point of view because the commercial world of contemporary dance as defined by Kwan (such as *So You Think You Can Dance* and *World of Dance*) is very similar in Malaysia and United States even though the two countries are across the globe from one another. Malaysian critical dance studies scholars do not want these global, commercial influences to dilute the contemporary concert dance form and erase folkloric traditions. As Ibrahim said in his interview, contemporary dance

should be “life imitating art imitating life imitating art […] the integrity and the authenticity will come from the honesty of the work.”

After the interviews, I realize that my current voice in dance represents who I am as a person. Even though I may not be able to revive tradition or to prevent extinction of a culture, if my nationality is important to my personal identity, my choreography will reflect that due to their intermingled nature. A close friend of mine, choreographer and dancer at National Ballet of China, SiZheng Wang Oliver once said, “If you’re dancing contemporary dance, you’re doing other people’s dance; if you’re doing your own dance, you’re doing contemporary dance.” This resonates in me as a choreographer. Things that are important to me consciously and unconsciously arise in creative process.

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I watched Ibrahim’s company, Sutra Dance Theatre, perform *Odissi* and overheard an argument from an interracial couple sitting next to me. The Malaysian-Chinese wife deemed the performance a traditional dance performance, after all the movement vocabulary featured classical Indian dance forms, but the Malaysian-Indian husband claimed that it was contemporary, because it integrated other dance styles and was performed by a cast of different ethnicities. The wife argued that it was not contemporary because contemporary dance consists of very “weird” movements and music. I remember laughing internally but was thinking of ways to categorize the work. It fell between Backer’s “traditional contemporary dance” and her subcategory of “modern contemporary dance.” Each delineation holds some truth. I am learning

to embrace this unique and rich interstitial space that contemporary dance in Malaysia occupies, yet defining Malaysian contemporary dance remains elusive.

In the early stage of my research, I began to altogether reject the notion of labeling. As an artist I am not tied to any singular Malaysian contemporary dance category as they are broad, contradictory, fleeting, and evolving. That being said, I appreciate the scholarly contributions particularly as they relate to the identification of historically significant contemporary trends and influences in my country (Malaysian contemporary dance in the 80's, Renaissance in the 90's). However, it is through these interviews and meaningful conversations with Malaysian dance artists that I am compelled to align myself with the genre. In a departure from the scholarly attempt to prescribe singular choreographic practices or movement traditions to Malaysian contemporary dance, these artists unhinge the art form from any one point of origin, aesthetic, or methodology to lay open a broad field of conceptual and philosophical discovery. They further articulate that contemporary dance in Malaysia is influenced by the country's ethno-religious social constructs, challenging political climate, and the familial opposition to dance as a career path. As a result, Malaysian dance artists are driven by a persistence and passion that empowers them to overcome these social pressures and even political oppression. If nationality and Malaysian culture are central to an artist's identity, the work will unconsciously bring out some essence of Malaysia; may it be ethnographic, political, or cultural. As a choreographer, my artistic departure point is conceptual and seeks to portray movement and presence that serves ideation and imagination. I echo the sentiments of Gonzales in hoping that artists produce "good art that emerges from Malaysia, regardless of how it is perceived." But what if I am not in Malaysia? Malaysia is inscribed in me, does my work emerge from Malaysia even if my body resides elsewhere?

CHAPTER 3: PAPER

Hijas's essay, *Transnationalism among Malaysian Contemporary Dance Choreographers*, provided a philosophical example of a Malaysian-Chinese contemporary choreographer who identified himself as Malaysian only when he had the opportunity to study abroad in Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts (HKAPA); "up until then, he had thought of himself as Chinese" (77). This realization was then turned into an experimental theatre work – *Death,* performed at HKAPA. Being an international student, I consider myself a transnational artist and this example resonates with my personal experience. Hijas proceeded to say that younger artists, with their personal global experiences, proliferate the "trajectories of their identities both outwardly and inwardly," which will disrupt the concept of "Malaysian contemporary dance" (77). Even though artists expand their knowledge by learning beyond borders, Hijas fears that Malaysian contemporary dance will be diluted by globalization and loose its traditions:

> […] do we find […] the very notion of a specifically Malaysian identity being dissolved into nothingness? Malaysian artists […] will become Southeast Asian artists, subsequently Asian artists, and eventually global artists with no fixed address – whither then our identities (Hijas 87)?

I disagree with Hijas's essay because personally, it is through my transnationalist experience that I seek my traditional roots. Malaysian contemporary choreographer and lecturer in dance, Leng Poh Gee, mentioned that it is through studying abroad that I am now able to "see the richness in dance of Malaysia." How is this expressed in my thesis choreography *PAPER*?

—

Whylah Paper?

Labels are used to ghettoize one thing from another in Malaysia from race to religion, perhaps a remnant of oppressive binary colonial definitions. Our Malaysian birth certificate has a column to identify our race and religion but is limited and has no identifiers for mixed-race babies like myself. Are labels like "Malaysian-Chinese/Indian," "contemporary modern," "Malaysian contemporary dance," or "Malaysian-Chinese modern contemporary dance" necessary if the society is fighting for equality? In 2002, Prime Minister Mahathir tried to promote the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian race) to unite Malaysians as one regardless of race and religion, but the word *bangsa* can mean "race" and "religion" (Lim 53). The prime minister stressed that he simply meant the "spirit" of being Malaysian instead of forming a new Malaysian race (Lim 54). Malaysia's new slogan, "1Malaysia," a "better" label, reminds us that we are all Malaysians despite our race, ethnicity, religious faith, or skin color.

> […] The 1Malaysia concept is a concrete manifestation and a reminder of unity that has already been inculcated in all of us. […] It encompasses Malaysian culture of excellence, perseverance and tolerance (Manan).

Despite being an improvement, "1Malaysia" resulted in bad publicity for Malaysia with its internationally reported financial scandal. I believe that labeling creates more harm than good in a multicultural society like Malaysia, but my personal friction with labeling sparked ideas for my choreography.

Paper documentation is a big part of my identity. I must carry multiple forms of identity to legitimize my existence in order to travel and study in the United States. World renowned contemporary artists Akram Khan and Sidi Larbi collaborated in the creation and performance of *Zero Degree*, a duet in which they frantically describe their insecurity in the airport. I too feel vulnerable when the airport officers ask me to hand over my passport. My anxiety takes over as I

ponder the scenarios of having my documents confiscated. How much trouble would I have to go through to prove who I am? I am frustrated by the amount of papers required to travel, study, or work. Even though I am multilingual, to apply to be a Teaching Associate (TA) at UCI as an international student, I have to pay to take an English language test (equivalent to the level of a third grader). These complicated bureaucratic procedures inspired my choreography.

Influenced by the paper-ridden environment that I grew up and live in, I have created a conceptual work that reflects the various labels that identify us in life. Khoo mentioned that it is our subconscious and physical body that really defines who we are. His comment brought me back to the basis of identity. Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, as quoted in Malaysian dance scholar Joseph Gonzales's book, defined identity as:

> […] a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image. As a quality of unself-conscious living, this can be gloriously obvious in a young person who has found himself as he has found his community. In him we see emerge a unique unification of what is irreversibly given – that is, body type and temperament, giftedness and vulnerability, infantile models and acquired ideals – with the open choices provided in available roles, occupational possibilities, values offered, mentors met, friendships made, and the first sexual encounters (*Intercultural* 6; qtd in Erikson 29).

I was enthralled by his definition of identity since my own essay – *The Paper Dance*[19], an open creative writing assignment written in Critical Issues for Dancers class, also detailed the struggle of individual identity to community identity. This essay was the beginning of my "paper journey" and inspired a nine-minute duet titled *life, liberty, and the pursuit of PAPER* which premiered at University of California, Irvine's "New Slate" in 2019. That work investigated paper as a monetary form and the greed it incites. I continued this artistic research in the creation

[19] The Paper Dance essay can be found in Appendix C.

of *PAPER*, my thirty-minute thesis choreography which considers the power of paper to create and destroy personal and communal identities.

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Paper As…
(methodology to PAPER)

I pre-filled the room with shredded papers before the rehearsal and asked my bewildered performers to come into the space. "Play," I said without further explanation and started the music. Unhesitatingly, the performers launched themselves into the paper piles and produced ridiculous movements and visual imagery such as paper shred wigs, paper as rain, and using the papers to play hide-and-seek. I observed silently in the corner and did not allow them to stop until the music ended. While the performers were still exhausted from their presentation, I began a discussion on "Paper As…" asking the performers to explore what paper personally meant to them. During my interview with dance pioneer Meh, he explored the alternative functions of an inanimate object by noticing the different properties of the table at which we sat. He composed his own "Table As…" improvisations. He mentioned that when choreographing with an object, "you have to first give the object life and meaning, never neglect that object unless it is on purpose" (Meh). It was through this act of free play that I hoped to animate the paper as Meh had brought the table to life. My performers and I listened to each other's experiences and then generated movements through improvisation using the performers' answers. While improvising, I invited the performers to be honest to themselves and be present in the contemporary time, allowing for thoughts to come and go while staying focused. I noticed that being present and

staying in the current state of mind helped bring out the performers' vulnerability and true self. Despite insightful and beautiful moments, the improvisations succumbed to chaos. I realized that I had to create a unique language to unify the performers' voices while taking their individuality into account.

In order to increase the performer's togetherness, I started rehearsals with warm-ups that consisted of *morphokines*[20] of various folk dances. I drew knowledge from my training history in various dance forms: the Mongolian dance's grounded yet buoyant bodily efforts, Bharatanatyam's focus on eyes and facial expressions, and Chinese Classical dance's concept of breathing and circulation. Initially I did not reveal the ethnic origins of the steps. This allowed the dancers to stay true to themselves instead of imitating folk-like steps. I grew to appreciate how different dancing bodies interpreted the movement, yet gained the ability to move as one unit. Deconstructing folkloric vocabulary by using its core elements was a departure point for eliciting the desired kinesthetic qualities from the performers. Furthermore, I conducted one-on-one conversations with each performer and asked each dancer to elaborate on what paper meant to them in terms of labels, financials, and phases of life. This process enabled me to draw inspiration and develop characters that were later implemented in my thesis choreography. The process of creating *PAPER* through self-discovery and understanding my roots has blossomed into the thirty-minute performance described below.

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[20] Refer to definition on page 8.

PAPER

"Once there is birth, death is certain. We are born a blank slate, then labeled by the papers we collect throughout life. Governments often uses paper to control our identity as civilians... Who are we without these papers? Do we cease to exist?" – Radhanath Thialan

As the quotation is read, the lights dim, and the performance begins. In silence, with her eyes closed, Performer A kneels in a pile of shredded papers while shredded papers continuously rain down on her, almost burying her as the audience enters the theater. "Diiiiing…." The musician hits the Tibetan singing bowl and we see a figure walking into the light with shredded paper domed[21] over her head and masking her face, a visual decapitation (see Fig. 8). As she is reaching Performer A, Performer B slowly combs papers off her own head onto the kneeling dancer. Her combing speed increases but as soon as her face is almost exposed, Performer B buries her head in the pile of paper. She then scoops an armful back on her head and solemnly exits. This section speaks volumes to me as I personally witness the struggle of self-identity both while growing up in Malaysia and while living abroad. The two performers demonstrated the paradox of constantly being restricted and labeled by paper, but at the same time, being so afraid to lose them that they consume our identity.

[21] An illustration was made for better visualization in Appendix F.

Fig. 8 visualizes the description above. These photos were taken during rehearsals. Performer A can be seen in the pile in both photos, whereas Performer B is seen on the right photo combing her paper hair onto Performer A.

Performer A remains kneeling in her paper shroud. Performer C uses a leaf blower to playfully fan away the mountain of paper and expose her form. As Performer C exits, Performer D enters and is shocked then immediately buries her. This occurs six times with increased intensity. Performer C grows more defiant with the paper removal as D becomes outraged and frantic in an attempt to keep the status quo. They finally chase each other off stage. This arc contrasts individualism against the desire for societal inclusion. A person cannot be defined solely by paper documents, but when applying or renewing of legal documents such as our passport, all we need is a stack of paperwork that proves our identity and legal status. Without legal papers, the legal document may not be renewed and one might lose their status.

A marching song starts as an authoritative looking Performer E stomps on stage, bows, and executes stamping gestures. A line of performers with paper domes piled on their heads walks out with a single sheet of paper in their hands. As the authoritative Performer E yells out their predetermined genders, one-by-one each performer hands in their paper while verbally repeating the announced gender (see Fig. 9). This scene repeats down the line until the last person – Performer F, who has a male figure and is wearing a wig, is called. “They” do not affirm the gender given on their paper, shocking the group. “They” become the center of attention and are commanded by Performer E to remove their pants to reveal their “true” gender. This reveals the sad reality of conservative Malaysian society, where it is still illegal to be publicly gay or transgender. The tourist minister in Malaysia, Mohamaddin Ketapi, ignorantly claimed that, “There are no gay people in Malaysia,” which made headlines on CNN (McKirdy). Performer F dances a solo to the renowned *Ave Maria* as the pianist and vocalist bring this

beautiful melody to life. The solo illustrates the first contradiction of paper-identity and self-identity. In the end, Performer F drops the wig to bourrée off stage.

Fig. 9 visualizes the marching description above. These photos were taken during rehearsals. Performer E is the commander in this photo with a line of performers lining up, ready to hand-in their paper documents when announced.

The next scene portrays the image of Kali. Her terrifying appearance is so scary that, as a child, I did not dare to look at her paintings in Hindu temples. My Dad, who is Malaysian-Indian, explained to me that her frightening appearance wards off evil spirits as she guards over us. The dancers create a silhouette of Kali in the piece as a reference to the conceptual source of my inspiration. Suddenly, the silhouette collapses as Performer A breaks free to run wildly around and land in an inversion to look at the papers below her. When she notices the audience's attention on her, she begins miming to the audience and asking aloud if her dancing is good enough. As she feels satisfied with the audience's reactions, the composer strikes the piano key and plays her original score – *A Minute Waltz to Nowhere*. As the stage refocuses on the raining

papers, all eight performers march out in unison. The performers repeat gestures of questioning while focusing on the raining papers. This section showcases a reflection of myself as an international student having to constantly prove my identity with multiple documents while applying to study abroad. The gestures depict a social awakening as civilians start to question authority. The happy, joyous waltz juxtaposes the frustrated movement vocabulary. The performers bid farewell to the papers and slowly disperse to form a new clump on the other side of the stage.

The whole stage dims. A bright light shines down on the performers undulating arms to cast a tree-like silhouette with moving branches on the floor. Only Performer D remains waving to the raining papers. The vocalist approaches him with an apple. He snatches the apple from her and glares at her until she leaves. As Performer D almost takes a bite of the apple, Performer G crawls towards him like a toddler asking for the apple. The apple symbolizes existence and is passed among the performers who rotate through different stages of life as a toddler, adolescent, young couple, mature couple with a child, and finally a senior couple. While choreographing this section, I drew inspiration from the story of Adam and Eve to portray the cycle of life. I interpret the apple not as a curse from the biblical stories but as the beginning of life. Eve's temptation led her to eat the "forbidden fruit" and caused mankind to be cursed. I assimilate the "curse" to death as once there is birth, death is certain; hence a life cycle. Paper has a strong connection to this message of life and death. The beginning of paper embodies the ending of a tree's life. The life cycle illustrated in this one-minute arc never fails to give me goosebumps since it reminds me how short life can be.

Later, Performer E struggles to climb onto Performer D's shoulder, straining to grasp something out of reach. She loses her balance and plunges into the cascading wave of performers

below caught by the net of their feet (see Fig. 10). Her grasping nature and disregard for her surroundings brings a sense of regret; without savoring the small moments, her aspirations were all for naught when her life comes to an imminent end. This image of Performer E being cascaded is inspired by Angela Rosenkrans's work *Confessions* and was featured with her permission. As the whole group continues to cascade Performer E, the vocalist revisited *Ave Maria* accompanied by Chopin's *Funeral March.* While singing, the vocalist weeps and shreds her own music score with the shredder placed beside the piano. Due to the competitiveness in Malaysian society, I dedicate this segment of *PAPER* to my Malaysian friends as a reminder to have fun along the journey while working hard towards their goals.

Fig. 10 shows Performer E being cascaded by the other performers. Image inspired by Angela Rosenkrans's *Confession* and is permitted to be used. These photos were taken during rehearsals.

Performer G abruptly breaks out to begin speaking and reports the current headlines of the world. Performer E pretends to listen, but gathers up scattered paper to violently stuff into her mouth to silence her. Performer G frustratedly spits them out only to be gagged again. The

performers line up across the stage and start collapsing as Performer C unsuccessfully scrambles to save them. How often are innocent civilians sacrificed by political instability? The vision for this segment foreshadows the death of Dr. Li Wen Liang from Wuhan, the whistleblower who alerted the world to the COVID-19 virus and was arrested by the Chinese government (Su). Suddenly a drone flies on stage and circulates the space. Flying objects usually provide hope to stranded individuals as they look up and wave towards their potential savior. Two dancers linger and a duet blossoms. The couple fluidly intertwines as they fight for survival. As the duet dwindles, the ensemble slowly walks towards the audience with their paper domed heads.

All of a sudden, Performer F scampers towards the centerstage holding a leaf blower and blasts away the papers to reveal their faces. He swears, shows his hatred, and expresses his contempt for the paper provoked obliteration of self. As his anger subsides, he mumbles his way backstage. A short silence befalls the stage. Each performer talks about the meaning of paper in their own languages, overlapping in vocal dissonance. The multilingual atmosphere poignantly reminds me of home where I often hear more than one language spoken in the street. As the monologues dwindle, one by one, they saunter back to the raining papers. When the raining paper lands on a performer, they frantically brush it off as though they are in pain. Performer F returns holding an umbrella and confidently walks forward to shelter the other performers, who grow calm under "their" shelter. Performer F's selfless act and empathy shows the human capacity for forgiveness. The lights fade and the work ends.

Superstitiously, Kali asserted her presence in this performance. *PAPER* was created and immediately "destroyed" due to the global coronavirus pandemic; the performance was cancelled and this choreographic work may forever remain an idea on paper.

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In the process of the work, I did not intend to focus on Malaysia or to promote any sort of Malaysian culture. However, I am influenced by my current milieu and the environment I grew up in. It was not until writing this thesis document that I identified the layers of Malaysian-ness present in my process and production. I am swimming with a stream of artists that have instilled "contemporary dance with their traditional heritage, reinvented tradition or created styles and techniques of their own" (Ibrahim 28). According to dance scholar Gonzales, many artists in Asia such as, Lin Hwai Min from Taiwan, Boi Sakti from Indonesia, and Chandralekha from India have pioneered these pathways for intercultural contemporary dance (*Intercultural* 7). *PAPER* was choreographed by me, a Malaysian contemporary dance artist. Despite studying abroad for six years now, my tradition and culture remain vital influences in my choreographic process. There may not be any movements, costumes, or make-up that could clearly scream Malaysia, but *PAPER* fits into the "contemporary dance" sentiments described by Malaysian artists in the field.

Thanks to my Hindu religion, I am inspired by goddess Kali.
Thanks to my father's love of world religious studies, I am inspired by Adams and Eve.
Thanks to my multicultural upbringing, I am inspired by hybrid cultures.
Thanks to the chaotic world we live in, I am inspired by the news.
Thanks to my friends who have labelled me, I am happy you called me "Banana."
But thanks to nothingness, I found my inspiration through a blank piece of paper.

CONCLUSION

I was rejected twice from a South East Asian summer choreographic workshop not on the basis my choreography's promise, but on the basis of my insufficient Malaysian presence (regardless of my nationality). This sparked my quest for my artistic identity and led to this thesis research. Within my discoveries, I recognize that the spirit of Malaysia's complex and everchanging hybrid peoples and culture shape the contemporary dance made in Malaysia and abroad today. I am more confident now when describing what contemporary dance in Malaysia is when asked. I am able to clarify that "Malaysian contemporary dance artists" may be located in Malaysia or abroad and that the phrase "Contemporary dance in Malaysia" implies contemporary works that are made in the soil of Malaysia even if they are performing elsewhere.

I can discuss the merits of terms such as "traditional contemporary" versus "modern contemporary dance," can explain the overreaching of terms like Asian contemporary dance, and can point to the 1980s as a period of significant productivity and visibility for hybrid works in Malaysian contemporary dance. Before this thesis, I misclassified my work as Malaysian contemporary dance. Now based in this scholarly research, conducted interviews, and creative process and from my individualistic view point, I conclude that using the term "contemporary dance" would be more than enough. Furthermore, most international contemporary dance artists today use their names as a source of promotion (e.g. A *Swan Lake* by Alexander Ekam, *Chotto Desh* by Akram Khan, Dua Space presents *Black and White Variation*) rather than by its defined genre. My work *PAPER* is solely Radhanath Thialan's work, but connects to my life as a Malaysian-Chindian-transnational-international student-Gen Z-progressive-MFA Candidate-contemporary choreographer-human-being-lah. I embrace the in-between spaces of what my

dance composition and future research can be as my body itself is a hybrid of a hybrid. Khoo puts it in this poem to portray how his body represents his individuality as an artist:

> My back represents who I am
>
> My spine is my family that anchors me
>
> Each muscle is a teacher who has molded me
>
> Every bone is a friend or lover who has come into my life at some point
>
> All these accumulated into a carriage that holds me
>
> I am nothing but a body of histories (Khoo).

As long as my body is growing and changing, my choreographic voice will continue to evolve and be influenced by my environment. The research never ends. *PAPER* is a contemporary dance choreographed by Radhanath Thialan, a Malaysian contemporary dance artist. My voice and my research is on-going as I embrace growth and change in life. May I be labeled Malaysian, a transnational artist, or of hybrid ethnicity, I will always stay true to myself, holding on to my roots as I continue creating the future. The labels and my physical body may be temporary in this lifetime, but if I create good works, my name may still be living past death.

"*Dei,* I think this is the *shén měi* of contemporary dance in Malaysia, *tak payah* categorization *lah.*"

("Hey (Indian), I think this is the divine beauty (Chinese) of contemporary dance in Malaysia, there is no need (Malay) for categorization *lah* (Malaysian slang).")

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APPENDIX A: Interview Questions

Working Research Title: ***Sharing Identities Through Dance Hybridity and Modernization***

In this research, dance hybridity is where the choreographer's departure point is to choreograph a contemporary dance by adding some traditional/cultural elements into the work. Whereas modernization is to create a traditional/cultural dance by breaking some rules to fit in the modern era (using traditional dance to tell a modern story for instance).

Questions:

1. What is your dance DNA (dance identity) vs. your personal/cultural identity?

2. How is dance in general different in Malaysia compared to other countries you have studied dance in? What makes Malaysia unique?

3. What is contemporary dance to you? How is it different to classical/traditional dance? (You can elaborate on trainings, performances, aesthetics, how do you define contemporary etc.)

4. How does your background in classical/traditional dances *or* just by growing up in Malaysia, influence your style/choices as a contemporary choreographer?

5. Describe your artistic process.

6. In your choreographic approach, what influences your concepts despite the style of dance or movement vocabulary? (Ideas, and not what kind of dance)

7. What inspires you to choreograph?

8. Is cultural identity important in your work? Why?

9. How is your identity as a Malaysian choreographer being shown in your work? Does it really matter?

10. Talk briefly about modernizing classical/traditional dance as a creator and a viewer. What were your past experience/feedback from audiences and critics?

11. From works that you have created, what was the feedback you received from modernizing traditional dance or dance hybridity? Did the audience perceive it welcomingly or do they prefer traditional dances at its most original form?

12. What is your most successful work in your own opinion, and why? What made it different?

13. What makes Malaysian contemporary dance Malaysian? How is it different from China, India, Indonesia etc.?

14. What would you love to see develop in future generations of Malaysian contemporary choreographers?

APPENDIX B: Interviewed Artists' Brief Profiles

(All bio provided by Interviewed Artists themselves)

ANTHONY MEH

Anthony Meh is the founder and Managing Director of Dua Space Dance Theatre and Artistic Director of Shuang Fu Performing Arts Troupe under Shuang Fu Disabled Independent Living Association. Meh graduated from The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts major in dance. He was an Ex-professional dancer in Taiwan Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company and GGD Dance Company in New York, USA. He was selected as one of the best dancers and choreographer by the dance critiques of the USA, China, and Singapore. Meh is a certified member of UNESCO International Dance Council sine 2005. He received numerous awards and recognitions, including: "Most Distinguished Young Artist Award" in 2003, "The Outstanding Young Malaysian Award" in 2008, "The Asia-Pacific Cultural Industry Creativeness Golden Award" in 2009, "The Cultural Character of the Year" by Global Golden Brand Awards in 2010, "World Chinese Model 2011" from World Chinese Venture Model Association and "The Best Dance Talent" by the Prestige magazine in its 3rd Anniversary edition in 2018.

AMAN YAP

Aman Yap is the founder, Artistic Director and Principal Dancer of Dua Space Dance Theatre. Yap received Hong Kong Duchess of Kent Scholarship in 1993. In 1995, he graduated from The Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts major in dance. Yap was an Ex-professional dancer of Hong Kong City Contemporary Dance Company, Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company, and GGD Dance Company in New York, USA. He toured 25 countries and 62 cities around the world and was selected as one of the Ten Most Outstanding Male Choreographers in Malaysia by Istana Budaya in 2003. His dance piece *Leave Me Alone* won "The Best Choreographer Award" and "The Best Set Design Award" in the 3rd BOH Cameronian Arts Awards in 2003 and was selected as Prestige 3rd Anniversary edition "The Best Dance Talent" in 2018. Yap was invited by Theatre Du Pif from Hong Kong as a guest artist to perform in *Dance Me to the End of Love* in Hong Kong, Singapore, China, Germany, and Columbia. His excellent performances in numerous major productions won great compliments such as *Hang Li Po, The Legend of Hou Yi and Chang Er, Anak Malaysia,* and *The Story of Lim Lian Geok*. Aman Yap was the principal dancer in his major works included *Black & White @ Variation, Two, Ancient Inscriptions, Den,* and *The Tree.*

JOSEPH GONZALES

Joseph is Head of Academic Studies and the MFA Dance program at The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts beginning his tenure in 2016, after serving as Dean of the Faculty of Dance at ASWARA (National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage) Malaysia from 1999 – 2015, with a professional performing career that spans more than 3 decades and across genres from Kuala Lumpur to Los Angeles and Seoul, from traditional dance to contemporary performances, ballet, theatre and musical theatre. He has worked as a full-time performer with Kuala Lumpur Dance Theatre, St. Moritz Gold Band and the UK National Tour and West End production of "The King and I". He holds a PhD in Dance Studies and Bachelor of Science in Mathematics from the University of Malaya, Masters of Arts (Professional Practice – Choreography) from

Middlesex University, Diplomas in Ballet, Modern Dance and Performing Arts from the Royal Academy of Dance, Imperial Society of Teachers of Dance, and London Studio Centre. Former Co-President of the Asian Dance Committee, Seoul, South Korea (2011-2017), Vice-President South East Asia World Dance Alliance, MyDance Alliance and Founder-Artistic Director of ASK Dance Company, a full-time professional dance company. A prolific choreographer with innumerable dance works that have been staged at festivals, a dance advocate who works for greater professionalism in the dance industry, author of Malaysia's first books on contemporary dance, professional curator of local and international dance festivals. Received awards for Best Choreography 2015, Cross-cultural Champion 2007 and Game Changer 2019 in Malaysia. Most importantly, a perennial student who is driven to "seize the day"! He has had a career as a sportscaster for radio and television working on major sports broadcasts such as the World Cup, the Olympics, Formula One, as well as reality dance programs in Malaysia.

LENG POH GEE

Leng Poh Gee is currently a lecturer at Universiti Perguruan Sultan Idris (UPSI), specializing in Labanotation and contemporary dance. He holds a Master of Arts (Performing Arts) from University of Malaya and Bachelor of Science (Human Development) from Universiti Putra Malaysia. He was a formal founding lecturer and Head of Dance Department, University of Malaya. He has been invited as Zapin dance notation advisor to the Johor Heritage Foundation; and served as one of the dance judges for BOH Cameronian Arts Awards. He has leveraged his extensive professional and performing experience as a dance researcher and stage manager in his choreographic works, which has been performed locally and abroad.

MAVIN KHOO

Mavin Khoo is internationally recognized as a dance artist, teacher, choreographer and artist scholar. His initial training was at the Temple of Fine Arts, Sutra Dance Theatre and Sri Wilayah Ballet School in Malaysia. He pursued his training in Bharatanatyam intensively under the legendary dance maestro, Padma Shri Adyar K.Lakshman in India, Cunningham technique at the Cunningham studios in New York and Classical Ballet under Marian St. Claire, Michael Beare, Nancy Kilgour, Paul Lewis, Ayumi Hikasa, Raymond Chai and Tory Jestyn. As a contemporary dance artist he has worked with Wayne McGregor, Akram Khan, Shobana Jeyasingh and many others. His commissioned works include creations for the Venice Biennale and Canada Dance Festival to name a few. 'Images in Varnam' (2001) was commissioned by the Royal Ballet Artists Development Initiative and was followed by another ROH2 commission 'Let me…with' Royal Ballet dancer Kristen McNally. Khoo holds an MA in Choreography from Middlesex University. He was a faculty member of the Dance Studies Department (at the School of Performing Arts) at the University of Malta. In 2014, he was appointed artistic director of ŻfinMalta Dance Ensemble, where he also choreographed and danced until 2017.
Khoo now maintains his touring work as a mature artist with a focus on solo Bharata Natyam performances and specifically commissioned contemporary duet works. He continues to act as Rehearsal Director to Akram Khan (Company) working on productions such as ITMOI, Giselle with English National Ballet and others. In 2019, Mavin was appointed Creative Associate of the Company.

RAMLI IBRAHIM (bio by Joseph Gonzales)
Ramli Ibrahim's talents have graced some of the finest centers of dance, from Australia and India to Europe since the 80s. His training in Ballet, modern and Indian classical dance reflects his diverse technical accomplishments and multifaceted approach to the arts. He is artistic director and principal choreographer for SutraDance Theatre, and has conceived work with a personal signature and distinctive Malaysian Identity. Guru Ramli has nurtured some of the brightest talents in the field of dance and as a visionary, has been instrumental in transforming the dance scene in Malaysia by boldly charting new paths and opening up fresh vistas. He is known for single-handedly establishing Odissi as a widely appreciated dance form in Malaysia. He has been conferred the Fulbright Distinguished Artist Award 1999, the Lifetime Achievement (BOH Cameronian) Award 2003, ANGARAG Lifetime Achievement Award 2006 (Guru Deba Prasad Institute, Orissa), Johan Setia Mahkota (JSM) and Anugerah Karyawan Seni 2006.

APPENDIX C: The Paper Dance Essay

This essay was written by myself in Spring of 2020 at UC, Irvine for my final assignment for Critical Issues for Dancers graduate class by Dr. Fisher. She also published this essay in UC, Irvine's Dance Major Journal found here: https://escholarship.org/uc/item/52j79130.

The Paper Dance

"What is it like living in a world where a piece of paper is in control of your status and emotions? Remember the time you received a traffic violation in the mail? It is no longer just a piece of paper huh…"

Argh…I was stuck trying to figure out what to write for this five-minute-story essay in my *Critical Issues in Dance* class! Writing is never my strong suit; hence I usually speak via movement. What did dance teach me? What do I want to say? We have so many papers to write, articles to read, journals to… Wait, don't you see the common denominator here? Papers to write on, articles are printed on papers. so are journals! Paper – that's my topic. (This is my choreographic thought process I learnt from dance…trying to make sense out of randomness, relating it to life.)

I can't believe that I will be writing a two-page paper about paper! Let's hope that it will not be "tear-rible".

We shouldn't look down on a piece of paper. As a human being in the social system, our lives rely so much on paper. At times, we panic when we lose certain papers, or when it's not there when you need it most… for instance, when you're on the toilet. On the day we were born, we were introduced to our very first piece of paper – the birth certificate. Throughout the rest of our lives, we constantly work to earn papers that quantify our achievements. Is the paper more important than the experience we get out of it? After a ballet, or a piano exam, we are awarded with a certificate that barely means anything (as we are the proof in the art itself). However, parents willingly pay with paper for their kids to earn a piece of paper. Isn't that interesting to see how the barter system evolved?

When we graduate, we are awarded with a diploma. When we travel, our passport has the power to bring us places. Other than some countries paying with polymer, many of us have paper currencies. When its payday, that cheque we receive has the ability to increase the amount in our bank account. Is there anything paper can't do? When we die, we were even given a death certificate that we will never witness.

Some people care so much about the paper, that their goal in life is to get as many papers as they can for credentials and wealth. Is the meaning of life to collect all these papers? The United

States Declaration of Independence does not state that men are created with unalienable rights: life, liberty and the pursuit of paper. As the greed for paper grows, the importance of passion diminishes. However, dance changed that perspective of mine. Passion comes first, then the papers will follow.

It is hypocritical when society wants change and has campaigns to cut down less trees. But we grow trees, just so that we can cut them down to make paper. Then we write “Save Our Planet! Stop Cutting Down Trees!” on it. I now wonder what life would be without paper.

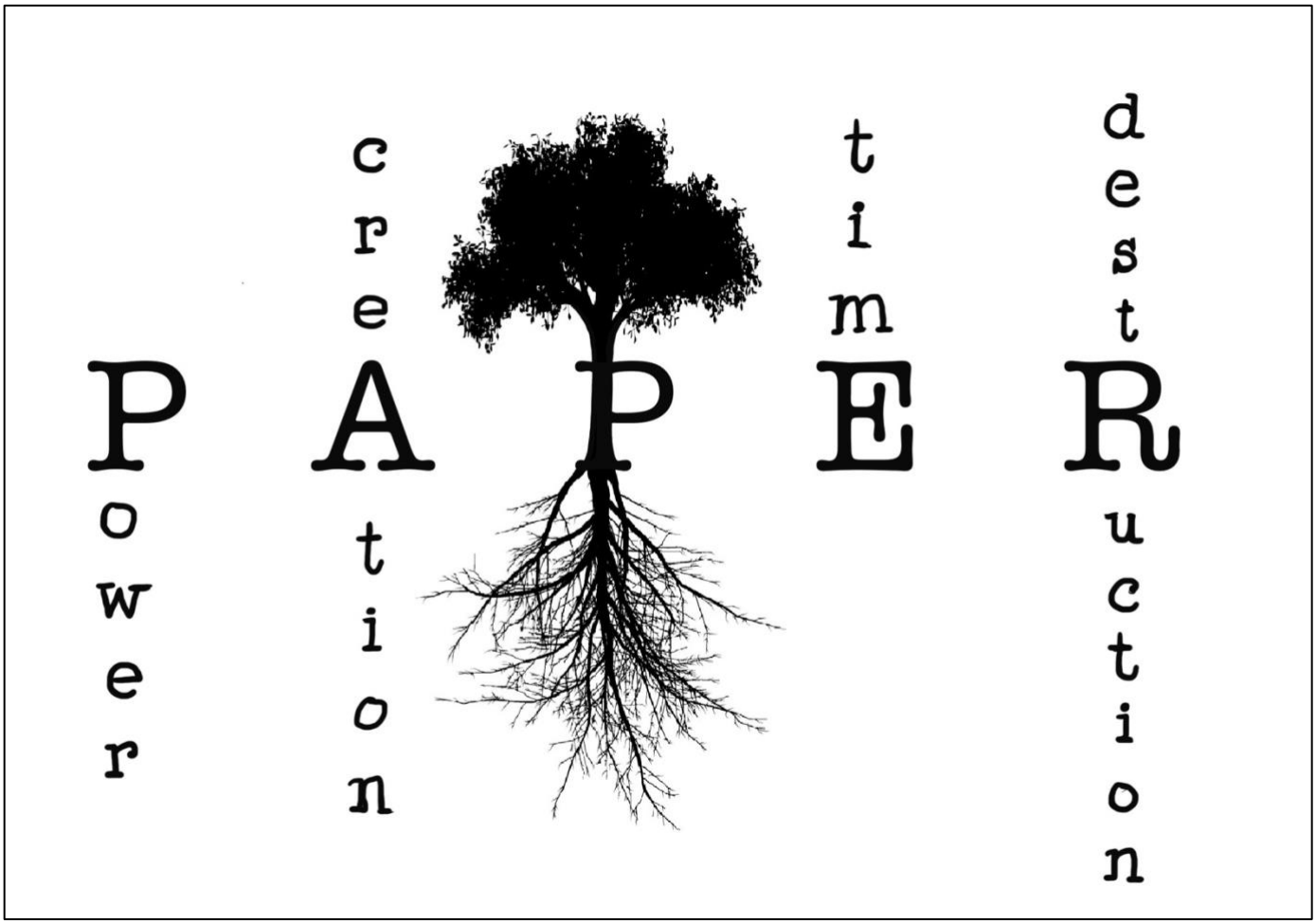
Essentially, we are who the papers say we are. Our identities and lives can be summarized by the documents we are granted and have earned. There’s a common saying that goes “If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it still make a sound?” If there were no more papers to back up our existence, would we cease to exist?

Sometimes I do wonder who I am without those papers? Without them, I would not be here in the Unites States, pursuing dance as a Malaysian international student at UC, Irvine.

Despite how scary paper can be, we are able to learn so much from papers as well. Without history being written and preserved, we are not able to learn from the past and help better the future to not repeat whatever failures that had been made in the past. Can dance temporarily help us escape the labeling papers that identifies us? In an economical society, are we continuously doing everything for paper or are we really passion driven?

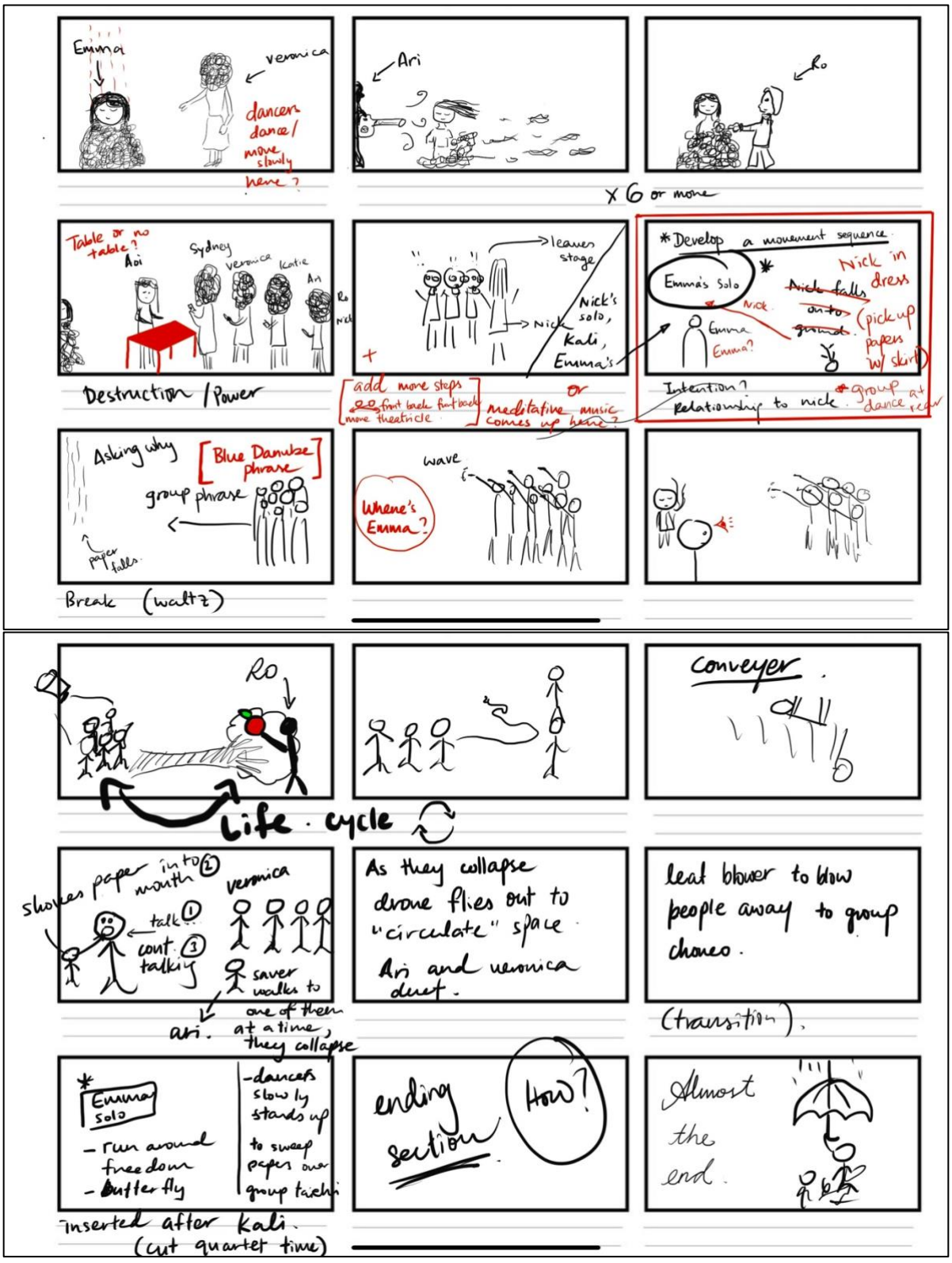
You will never look at papers the same way again. Be yourself, be proud, and be bold. Don’t let the papers label you fully. Don’t let that parking violation you got in the mail ruin your whole day.

APPENDIX D: Image of Thesis Performance Title



Drawn and designed by Radhanath Thialan using Procreate.

APPENDIX E: Storyboard for *PAPER*



Drawn by Radhanath Thialan using Procreate.

APPENDIX F: Illustration of *PAPER*

Drawn by Radhanath Thialan using Procreate.

APPENDIX G: *PAPER* performance information

For further inquiry regarding this thesis, feel free to contact Radhanath Thialan at rthialan@uci.edu

-or-

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