NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Hidden in Plain Sight:
Women Choreographers of 1940s American Modern Dance

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Field of Theatre and Drama

By

Jessica Friedman

EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

June 2023

© Copyright by Jessica Friedman, 2023

All Rights Reserved

Abstract

This dissertation examines how racially, ethnically, and sexually minoritized women embodied and contested competing images of national identity between World War II and the Cold War. I challenge dominant narratives of modern dance, which overlook gender politics as women left the art form and white men gained prominence in it during the 1940s. Those common narratives obscure a cohort of Black, Jewish, and/or queer women—Pearl Primus, Janet Collins, Sophie Maslow, Eve Gentry, Jean Erdman, and Sybil Shearer. These women used canonical dance techniques to reimagine national belonging as they protested racism and homophobia in the United States. In examining these women's works, I address the previously unstudied decrease of women in modern dance during the 1940s. I demonstrate how aesthetic, financial, and political crises that the art form faced required minoritized women to shapeshift into ancillary theatrical genres as they were less able than white men to be read as the neutral bodies that modern dance in the early Cold War period required. Ultimately, I argue that marginalized women used established dance techniques in ways that redefined Americanness during the 1940s while responding to changing aesthetic, national, and transnational politics. By describing how minoritized subjects can use canonical and white-signifying practices as a way to dismantle those practices' ideological underpinnings, this project interrogates how markers of identity can reinforce or resist the embodied implications of national and artistic belonging.

This dissertation decolonizes the canon of US modern dance by attending to women whose interventions have been sidelined or written out by dominant narratives of modern dance. It shows how women danced against racism, homophobia, and fascism—dance content as urgent today as during the 1940s—in ways that pointed to the power of minoritized bodies to hold and

carry forward histories of resistance and speculative futures. This dissertation extends the field of dance studies by demonstrating how marginalized artists maneuvered through and transformed time periods commonly understood as marked by stagnation. It also offers a model for understanding how dances of national identity could be used to offer transnational understandings of belonging. In examining where the women of US modern dance went during the 1940s, this dissertation contributes answers on how the art form shifted in political, financial, and aesthetic terms just before the turn to the latter half of the twentieth century.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been possible without my incredible committee. My advisor Susan Manning's mentorship and support have been invaluable. I strive to follow her example for scholarly rigor, commitment to dance, and unwavering kindness. Words cannot capture how grateful I am to Susan for all she has done for me and for the field of dance studies. From teaching my cohort's methods and prospectus classes to providing guidance through feedback and by example on how to write women's histories, Elizabeth Son has been an integral part of my research. I am grateful to be able to learn feminist historiography from her. Nadine George-Graves has been a mentor since my earliest days of graduate school. Her instruction and guidance propelled me through graduate studies at two universities. Ramón Rivera-Servera encouraged me to dig into the kinesthetic archival methods my research required. His insights on finding oneself in one's research process greatly aided my archival research. Thank you to my committee for more than could ever fit on these pages.

I am indebted to the Interdisciplinary PhD in Theatre and Drama Program at Northwestern University for providing a home to me and my research. I especially thank Masi Asare, Melissa Blanco Borelli, and Dassia Posner for offering guidance and inspiration at various points of my doctoral studies. Many thanks to IPTDance past, present, and future, for our shared work in carving space for dance everywhere we go. A very special thank you goes to my extraordinary cohort Claudia Kinahan for her friendship, encouragement, and wit. Our small, but fabulous, cohort created tremendous joy and calm. I am lucky to have the privilege of going through graduate school with simply the best cohort-mate and friend.

The road to this dissertation was circuitous and each stop provided me with treasured mentors. I thank Deborah Paredez, my undergraduate mentor at Columbia University's Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race, for inspiring my love of knowledge. Her academic fabulosity is my aspiration. I am grateful to the Joint PhD Program in Drama and Theatre at University of California, San Diego/University of California, Irvine, where I began my graduate studies. I thank Tara Rodman for her always-wise advice and our shared laughter. I owe much of my smooth transition between graduate programs to Tara's guidance. Thank you to Ketu Katrak for her encouragement and for introducing me to so many dance worlds. I am indebted to the incomparable Marybeth Ward who enabled me to forge my own cross-campus dance studies doctoral curriculum. Much of my research would not have been possible without her logistic prowess and commitment to graduate students. At UC Santa Barbara, I gratefully thank Ninotchka Bennahum for her guidance, especially in teaching me the art of curation. At UC Riverside, I thank Linda Tomko and Anthea Kraut for their support of my work. A special thank you goes to Jacqueline Shea Murphy at UC Riverside whose instruction and kindness led me to develop my dedication to dance studies and to never give up on the possibilities of dance. Her inspiring example galvanizes my conviction that dance can repair the world.

My research would not have been possible without the help of librarians and specialists at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (especially Jennifer Eberheardt), 92nd Street Y Archives (especially Bernard Schwartz), the Newberry Library (especially Catherine Grandgeorge), the American Dance Festival Archives (especially Dean Jeffrey), the San Francisco Museum of Performance + Design, and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Robert S. Cox Special Collections. I gratefully thank Nancy Allison, Mary Anne Santos

Newhall, and Wendy Perron for their generosity in sharing their knowledge of the dancers in this dissertation with me. Grants from New York Public Library, 92nd Street Y, Renate Voris Foundation, and Northwestern University supported this work.

Many thanks to my family. I am grateful to my siblings, Nicholas and Kim Friedman, Megan Friedman and Muneer Hameer, Abigail Friedman, and Matthew Friedman, for their encouragement and humor. Without my parents Lee and Marybeth Friedman, none of my dreams would have been possible. Even though they had no previous knowledge of dance, they drove me to countless dance classes and auditions; provided me with private ballet coaching; and attended numerous performances. My beloved late father, to whom this dissertation is dedicated, taught me hard work, dedication, and love. Every word of this dissertation is owed to my mother who continually motivates me to follow my ambitions in the midst of too many tragedies. Finally, I thank my husband Michael Lam for all of the love, joy, and laughter he brings to my life. I would never have imagined when I met Michael in the library during my first quarter of graduate school the adventure I was about to go on or the happiness I would experience.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated my beloved late father, Dr. Lee Friedman, PhD, who is my constant source of inspiration and my model for tireless work and love.

Table of Contents

Abstract……………………………………………………………………………...……….3

Acknowledgements……………………………………………………………………………..5

Dedication……………………………………..……………………………………...………. 8

List of Illustrations…………………………………………………………………………...…10

Introduction: Disentangling US Modern Dance during the 1940s……………………………..13

Chapter 1:
Dancing Blackness Between the Local and The Global: The Solo Recitals of Pearl Primus and Janet Collins……………………………………………...………………………………71

Chapter 2:
Re-Embodying National Bodies: Sophie Maslow's and Eve Gentry's Americana Dances…....151

Chapter 3:
Finding Meaning in Movement: Jean Erdman's and Sybil Shearer's Abstraction as Americanist Dance……….……………………………………….……………………………………228

Conclusion:
The 1940s in US Modern Dance: A Time of Possibility, Constraint, and Diffusion…………306

Bibliography………………………………………………………………………………321

List of Illustrations

Chapter 1

Figure 1: Pearl Primus in *African Ceremonial* for a USO performance, 1940s. Pearl Primus Collection, American Dance Festival Archives.……………………………………………89

Figure 2: Pearl Primus in *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, 1940s. Pearl Primus Collection, American Dance Festival Archives.……………………………………………...…………………92

Figure 3: Pearl Primus dancing. Pearl Primus Collection, American Dance Festival Archives...97

Figure 4: Sketch of *Study in Nothing* (revised version for group) by Pearl Primus. Pearl Primus Collection, American Dance Festival Archives…………..……………………………….103

Figure 5: Pearl Primus in *Hard Time Blues* at Café Society, 1940s. Photographer: Rosalie Gwathmey. Ivan Black Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, © 2022 Estate of Rosalie Gwathmey / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY……..…………………………………………………………..…106

Figures 6-10: Portraits of Pearl Primus, 1940s. Pearl Primus Collection, American Dance Festival Archives...…..…..…………………………………………………….……………106

Figure 11: Janet Collins on the Cover of *Dance Magazine*, 1949. Photographer: Constantine. Janet Collins Scrapbook, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Jerome Robbins Dance Division…………...…………………………………………………………………120

Figure 12: Janet Collins in *Mozart's Rondo*, 1949. Photographer: Carl Van Vechten. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, ©Van Vechten Trust.…………………………………………………………………..………………122

Figures 13-17: Photos of Janet Collins in *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen* from *Ebony*, 1949. Photographer: Dennis Stock. © Dennis Stock/Magnum Photos…………..……………126

Figure 18: Janet Collins in *Protest*, 1949. Photographer: W.E. Owen. Janet Collins Scrapbook, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Jerome Robbins Dance Division.…..……132

Figure 19: Janet Collins in *New Orleans Carnival,* 1949. Photographer: Carl Van Vechten. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, ©Van Vechten Trust …………………………………………………………………….……………135

Chapter 2

Figure 1: Maslow in "On Top of Old Smokey" from *Folksay*, 1940s. Photographer: Barbara Morgan. 92Y Archives. Courtesy of Barbara Morgan photographs and papers, Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA……………………………………165

Figure 2: Maslow and William Bales in "Sweet Betsey from the Pike" from *Folksay*, 1940s. Photographer: David Linton. John Martin Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts……………………………………………….…………167

Figure 3: "Hey You, Sun, Moon, Stars" from *Folksay*, 1940s. John Martin Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts…………….………169

Figure 4: Champion (William Bales) pushes down his mother (Jane Dudley) after knocking down and stealing the money of his crippled brother (Normand Maxon). *Life* Magazine clipping, undated. Photographer: Phillipe Halsman. Sophie Maslow Research Materials, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. ©Philippe Halsman Archive 2022. ………………..……………………………………………………………..………183

Figure 5: Champion (Bales) attempts to seduce The Girl He Marries (Caiserman). *Life* Magazine clipping, undated. Photographer: Phillipe Halsman. Sophie Maslow Research Materials, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. ©Philippe Halsman Archive 2022. ………………………………..……………………………………………183

Figure 6: The Girl He Marries (Caiserman) attempts to win Champion's (Bales) affection only to face his abuse. *Life* Magazine clipping, undated. Photographer: Phillipe Halsman. Sophie Maslow Research Materials, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. ©Philippe Halsman Archive 2022..…………………..……………………185

Figure 7: The Girl He Marries (Caiserman) begs Champion (Bales) to take her on his exhibition tour and not pursue Manager's Wife. *Life* Magazine clipping, undated. Photographer: Phillipe Halsman. Sophie Maslow Research Materials, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. ©Philippe Halsman Archive 2022. ……………....…185

Figure 8: Champion (Bales) and Manager's Wife (Sophie Maslow) choose to leave their partners for one another. *Life* Magazine clipping, undated. Photographer: Phillipe Halsman. Sophie Maslow Research Materials, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. ©Philippe Halsman Archive 2022. ……………………………..……...…186

Figure 9: "Performance sketches of Eve Gentry in 'Groundhog Hunt,'" 1946 or 1947. Artist: Glen Rounds. Eve Gentry: Kaleidoscopic History, San Francisco Museum of Performance and Design………..…………………...…………………………………………….……………...…211

Figure 10: Gentry in *Groundhog Hunt* at its New York City premiere, 1945. Photographer: Bruce Gentry. Courtesy of Core Dynamics Pilates and Kevin A. Bowen. ………………...…………211

Figure 11: Gentry in *Quiet Day in the Wild, Wild West*, 1950. Photographer: Bruce Gentry. Courtesy of Core Dynamics Pilates and Kevin A. Bowen…………………………………….……214

Chapter 3

Figure 1: Jean Erdman in Transformations of *Medusa*, 1942. Photographer: Barbara Morgan. Joseph Campbell Foundation. Courtesy of Barbara Morgan photographs and papers, Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA. ……………………………238

Figure 2: Reconstruction of *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle* (Nancy Allison in front). Photographer: Lois Greenfield. Jean Erdman Dance…………………………………..……246

Figure 3: Erdman in *Ophelia*. White Barn Theater…………………………………….….255

Figure 4: Sybil Shearer in *In a Vacuum*. Photographer: screenshot from film by Helen Balfour Morrison. Chicago Film Archives…………………………………………………………276

Figure 5: Shearer's *In a Vacuum* costume. Photographer: Author, taken at Shearer's studio in November 2019……………………………………………………………………………276

Figures 6 and 7: Shearer in beginning section of *O Lost!* Photographer: screenshot from film by Balfour Morrison. Chicago Film Archives…………..…………………………………..……282

Figures 8 and 9: Shearer in *No Peace on Earth.* Photographer: screenshot from film by Balfour Morrison. Chicago Film Archives……………………..……………………………………293

Figures 10 and 11: Shearer's studio in Northbrook, Illinois. Photographer: Author, taken at Shearer's studio in November 2019…………………………………………….…………302

Introduction:

Disentangling US Modern Dance during the 1940s

The 1940s was a period in US modern dance history marked by transformation inextricably connected to national and transnational politics. As the nation and art form transitioned from World War II to the Cold War, both questioned the limits of inclusion. At the same time as Jews and other European ethnic groups assimilated into whiteness, African American dancers achieved greater self-representation on the concert dance stage. Wartime mobilization brought about new definitions of national identity that promised to include minoritized ethnic and racial groups. Modern dancers' interracial casts and reconfigurations of racial representational codes took part in that national re-imagining. New visions of United States national identity were aided by the war's transnational mobilization against fascism, galvanizing anti-racist and anti-capitalist causes in the US, which were espoused by many New York modern dancers. Women entered the US work force and challenged conventions for gendered labor during the decade. Men gradually came to outpace women as technical innovators in modern dance to be later canonized in the art form. The 1940s' global transitions and transformations rendered the decade an optimal time for re-imagining and re-embodying definitions of national identity with an attention to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. US modern dance engaged with those possibilities and challenges.

In the midst of the decade's social and political change, however, US modern dance faced an existential crisis. Critics and artists during the decade narrated the state of the field as hanging in a balance between survival and obscurity due to interrelated financial, political, and aesthetic crises, all of which will be discussed in greater detail later in this Introduction. In the beginning of the decade, major sources of modern dance patronage terminated due to state concerns that

these organizations harbored communists. This contrasted with Broadway's steady increase in financial viability along with the commercial popularity of musical theatre, including that which incorporated theatrical modern dance. Critic John Martin was among the first to publish commentary on a financial and aesthetic dilemma faced by modern dance with his "A Crisis in Modern Dance" written for the 1939-1940 performance season.[1] He saw the aesthetic divide between concert and commercial dance as a crucial part of the crisis. As the decade progressed, the tenors of this crisis shifted. The political liability of artists purported to have communist or queer sympathies caused them to face state surveillance. As a result, modern dance stakeholders positioned supposedly abstract dance as a safe and, therefore, suitable for critical recognition, mode of the art form in contrast to theatrical modern dance with narrative representation. Writings of numerous artists and critics throughout the decade situated negotiations between theatricalism and abstraction, as well as the explicit or implicit political and financial undercurrents of those aesthetics, as a defining characteristic of US modern dance and its fight for survival during the 1940s.[2] Some critics expressed doubts that the art form would continue past the end of the decade.[3]

Given the intense change and crisis due to political and aesthetic cross-currents during the 1940s, it is particularly surprising that artists, critics, and scholars have narrated the decade as

[1] John Martin, "A Crisis in the Dance," *The American Scholar* 9, no. 1 (1940 1939): 115–20.
[2] For examples, see Martha Coleman, "On the Teaching of Choreography: Interview with Jean Erdman," *Dance Observer* 19, no. 4 (April 1952): 52–53; Jean Erdman, "The Dance as Non-Verbal Poetic Image, Part I," *Dance Observer* 16, no. 4 (April 1949): 48–49; Jean Erdman, "Young Dancers State Their Views: As Told to Joseph Campbell," *Dance Observer* 15, no. 4 (April 1948): 40–41; Jean Erdman, "What Is Modern Dance?," *Vassar Alumnae Magazine*, February 1948; Robert Horan, "Poverty and Poetry in Dance," *Dance Observer* 11, no. 5 (May 1944): 52–54, 59; Gertrude Lippincott, "Will Modern Dance Become Legend?," *Dance Magazine*, November 1947.
[2] Martin, "A Crisis in the Dance"; "'Modern' Dance Devotees Present Concerts Heedless of Any Profit," *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*, November 6, 1949.
[3] For examples, see Martin, "A Crisis in the Dance"; Lippincott, "Will Modern Dance Become Legend?"; "'Modern' Dance Devotees Present Concerts Heedless of Any Profit."

a period of stagnation for US modern dance. Queer white male dancers in the 1950s were among the first to voice this argument. Merce Cunningham, Erick Hawkins, and Alwin Nikolais, for instance, developed new techniques and sought to break from the individual aesthetics of female choreographers, such as Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, or Doris Humphrey, who rose to fame in the 1930s and whose techniques continued to proliferate during the 1940s.[4] These men positioned themselves as advancing modern dance to its next major technical paradigm after a stalemate during the 1940s. Later dance historians, including pioneering dance critics-scholars Selma Jeanne Cohen, Jill Johnston, and Sally Banes, sided with these male artists and wrote of the 1940s as a time of stagnation and repetition of women's 1930s theatrical choreography until the men (and a few women) came and innovated new, abstract ways of moving in the 1950s.[5] In favoring abstract over representational dance, these scholars solidified a Greenbergian mode of dance criticism. They echoed art critic Clement Greenberg's call for medium specificity by attending to what they saw as the most essential component of dance: movement technique for the sake of itself. In addition to prioritizing dance without a clear representational component, dance scholars of this view implied that the sharp increase in the predominance of men in modern dance during the 1940s was the art form's saving grace. At the same time, they ignored women innovators on the modern dance concert stage during the decade.

---

[4] For examples of male choreographers during the mid-1940s through 1950s' views on this matter, see Selma Jeanne Cohen, "Avant-Garde Choreography," *Criticism* 3, no. 1 (1961): 16–35; Selma Jeanne Cohen, ed., *The Modern Dance: Seven Statements of Belief* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, [1965] 2011); James Moreno, *Dances of José Limón and Erick Hawkins* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2020); Claudia Gitelman and Randy Martin, eds., *The Returns of Alwin Nikolais: Bodies, Boundaries and the Dance Canon* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007).

[5] Cohen, "Avant-Garde Choreography"; Cohen, *The Modern Dance*; Jill Johnston, "The New American Modern Dance," in *The New American Arts*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz-Editor (New York: Collier Books, 1965), 162–93; Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance*, 2nd Edition (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987).

Recent dance scholars have revised narratives of 1940s US modern dance with a focus on race and politics. Susan Manning reperiodizes modern dance history and marks the 1940s as "*the* crucial turning point for modern dance *and* Negro dance."[6] She theorizes this shift in race and representation as it aligns with changes in patronage structures.[7] In revising canonical accounts of modern dance history, Manning shows how the 1940s marked a transformation in understandings of race on the modern dance stage. Rebekah Kowal demonstrates how artists of the postwar period, including the late 1940s, achieved political efficacy in their dances even when those works appeared to be abstract.[8] She shows how the shifting understandings of race and racial representation explicated by Manning impacted artists' political interventions. In a later work, Kowal builds on her analysis of modern dance during the 1940s by examining how the ethnic dance form emerged as a genre unto itself, apart from its modern dance ties. She argues that ethnic dance worked in service of a US neo-imperialist agenda to showcase the nation as an exemplar of harmony and democracy in the postwar era.[9] Manning's and Kowal's arguments demonstrate the necessity of challenging definitions of the 1940s as a decade of status quo preservation. Although their examinations of racial and political facets of 1940s US modern dance show the decade as one of change, they do not address why and how the time period witnessed a sharp decrease in the predominance of women canonized on the modern dance concert stage and how those gendered politics impacted and were impacted by simultaneous financial, political, and aesthetic concerns.

---

[6] Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, xx [emphasis in original].
[7] Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*.
[8] Rebekah J. Kowal, *How to Do Things with Dance: Performing Change in Postwar America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010).
[9] Rebekah J. Kowal, *Dancing the World Smaller: Staging Globalism in Mid-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

In my dissertation, I complicate the revisionist readings of 1940s US modern dance further by underscoring the many alternatives to and varieties of theatricalism and abstraction created by female choreographers in the 1940s. Uncovering these overlooked modernisms answers several interrelated questions. Why did the predominance of female choreographers give way to the predominance of (gay) male choreographers in the eyes of modern dance critics and later scholars? How did theatricalism and formalism become disentangled in New York modern dance as new patronage structures emerged? How did these varieties of modernism (re)define Americanness?

I interrogate changes in aesthetics, patronage, race, and gender in US modern dance during the 1940s. These facets are all inextricably connected to enactments of national identity. The decade's stretch from wartime mobilization to the Cold War combined with earlier artists' attempts to claim a distinctly American modern dance in such a way that rendered negotiations of national identity a crucial task for modern dancers. Each of the artists studied in this dissertation—Pearl Primus, Janet Collins, Sophie Maslow, Eve Gentry, Jean Erdman, and Sybil Shearer—intervened in presentational frames that functioned as metonymic for the Americanness of US modern dance. Much like the frame of an art work, presentational frames were comprised of the formal themes and choreographic tactics deployed in a concert dance work that impacted the movement technique's meanings. As modern dance became increasingly codified in the 1930s, particular presentational frames came to be expected of choreographers as a means through which they could prove themselves as distinctly American modern dancers. I demonstrate how the women of this dissertation used presentational frames in ways that

embodied and contested definitions of national identity while working in explicit relation to the decade's shifting aesthetic, patronage, and gendered regimes.

I argue that US modern dance in the 1940s underwent changes in patronage that necessitated those in aesthetics and gender. Specifically, a financial crisis early in the decade rendered it necessary for female modern dancers to find homes in other performance genres, such as Broadway, ethnic dance, theatre, ballet, and other modes of ensemble work. This diffusion of modern dancers into other, more theatrical venues brought about a disentanglement of theatricalism and formalist abstraction. Theatricalism—an aesthetic that favored narrative, representation, or text—and formalist abstraction—an aesthetic that preferred movement for the sake of movement apart from meaning—had both been standard practice in modern dance since its earliest days. In the 1940s, modern dancers who moved from the concert stage to more theatrical venues for financial reasons emphasized the art form's theatrical capabilities. Those opposed to commercialism in modern dance clung to formalist abstraction as the only real mode of modern dance. Consequently, these previously entangled aesthetics became not only disentangled, but also held in stark opposition by modern dance artists and critics.

Theatricalism and formalist abstraction existed not as a binary, but as opposite ends of a continuum. Many artists shortened the distance between these poles by choreographing works that evoked representational meaning while also using movement in ways that suggested it went beyond meaning. For example, Graham's *Primitive Mysteries* (1931) recalled Southwest Indigenous spiritual ceremonies she had witnessed at the same time as it engaged abstract movement formations apart from any representational context. A given dance work could also muddle a divide between theatricalism and formalist abstraction through its critical reception.

Poet Edwin Denby, for instance, attended to technical movement description and analysis in his dance criticism for *New York Herald Tribune*, beginning in 1942. Even a dance work with a clearly articulated narrative could be rendered and interpreted as abstract when written about in terms of how the dancers executed their movement techniques. The gap between theatricalism and formalist abstraction could also be shortened through repetition of a given dance work. As, for example, the Martha Graham Dance Company performed Graham's *Appalachian Spring* (1944) over and over again, critics focused less on its narrative and more on how the dancers physically succeeded or failed in the work's well-known steps. These messy collapses in the continuum from theatricalism to formalist abstraction rendered female modern dancers' disentanglement of the two aesthetics all the more remarkable during the 1940s.

Theatricalism and formalist abstraction succeeded or failed when met with particular kinds of bodies. Although white female soloists and ensembles had been taken by critics as able to embody abstraction in the 1930s, that gendered allowance shifted by 1940 when the all-female ensembles had disbanded or included men. By 1940, women and/or artists of color were taken by critics as inherently representational and, therefore, apt for theatricalism. Formalist abstraction's claims of freedom from overt meaning often failed when met with female and/or racialized bodies. Even when women and artists of color performed in purportedly abstract works, such as Cunningham's early dances, critics used the pieces' adherence to Eurocentric aesthetics or heterosexual partnering in ways that centered the white male choreographer in a register of abstraction, rather than account for difference in the dance's cast. In this way, as US modern dance on the concert stage increasingly excised theatricalism in the late 1940s, white (gay) men were able to gain prominence as exemplary of an ostensibly absolute modern dance—a dance

without need of music, costumes, or other theatrical elements. Women and/or artists of color, in contrast, found financial viability in genres with greater allowances for theatricalism. Consequently, dominant narratives of modern dance during the 1940s present an image of women disappearing from the art form as these narratives focus on men's creation of new movement vocabularies.

I argue in this dissertation that the women of US modern dance did not disappear during the 1940s, but their numbers diffused among several different performance genres. Crucially, the women took their modern dance techniques with them. The disentanglement of theatricalism and formalist abstraction paradoxically mixed modern dance into Broadway, ethnic dance, theatre, and ballet. The cohort of women included in this dissertation danced on the fault line of US modern dance's disentanglement and diffusion into other arenas. I argue that they used established presentational frames in ways that redefined Americanness in response to the unsteady ground of changing aesthetics, patronage, and transnational politics. Following Manning's reperiodization, I posit that the 1940s marked *the* crucial turning point for the tightly-braided relationship between patronage, aesthetics, race, gender, and power in US modern dance. As artists and critics continued attempts to demarcate a particular mode of modern dance as specific to the US, this braided relationship could not be separated from enactments of national identity.

This dissertation answers a current call in dance studies to decolonize the field and its canons. In revising dominant narratives of modern dance history, my project recovers a range of minoritized women's artistic and political theories. It expands common narratives of modern dance history by focusing on moments of transition and transformation, rather than on

innovations in choreographic approach. In addressing the gendered politics of US modern dance's financial, political, and aesthetic crises during the 1940s, I demonstrate how those issues manifest in distinct ways on differently racialized, gendered, or sexualized bodies. In this dissertation, I show who has been written out of modern dance history and why those elisions matter. In taking women's embodied practices as repositories of knowledge, my dissertation foregrounds minoritized histories that have been confined to the body and left out of the written record. Although dance studies' calls for decolonization are often future-oriented, it is crucial to understand the politics of historical erasure in order to generate an inclusive, multi-faceted future for the field. As a critical women's history, my dissertation decolonizes dance canons by documenting and theorizing an often-overlooked or simply narrated period of modern dance history. It also participates in a decolonization of dance studies by providing a methodological example for how to attend to minoritarian identity markers within the intersecting relationship of aesthetics, economics, and transnational politics. My dissertation demonstrates the importance of counter-hegemonic histories held in the bodies and embodied practices of variously minoritized women.

***

Changes in Patronage and an Aesthetic Disentanglement

The changes in patronage that instigated US modern dance's transformation in the 1940s began with artists' and critics' attempts to claim a national modern dance form as well as adjustments to funding bodies in the 1930s. Although pioneering modern dancers Isadora Duncan and Ted Shawn exhibited nativist impulses in their work, the 1930s witnessed a galvanized attempt to set modern dance in the US apart from its European, especially German,

counterparts. For example, Graham wrote in 1930 that dance in the US must not duplicate the styles of other nations, but create an American form, drawing from the nation's "two primitive sources"—Native American spirituality and African American rhythm.[10] One year later, Humphrey similarly demanded an American modern dance instead of imitations of other regions, especially German modern dancer Mary Wigman.[11] In the mid-1930s, US leftist modern dancers changed their previous contestation of national identities in order to join the Popular Front. As part of the Popular Front, these leftist dancers embraced internationalism with a focus on national identities, dancing, for instance, in response to the Spanish Civil War or in support of the Soviet Union or Communist International.[12] At the same time, the Bennington School of the Dance in Vermont, a summer dance school and performance festival, codified the modern dance techniques of Graham, Holm, Humphrey, and Charles Weidman—later known as The Big Four. As Manning has explained, Bennington was filled almost entirely with women and, under the direction of Martha Hill and her close associate Mary Shelly, galvanized a proto-feminist and queer ethos for US modern dance in the 1930s.[13] Bennington's production of dances and dancers in tandem with artists' and critics' continued efforts to Americanize modern dance rapidly codified the techniques of The Big Four as distinctly American and more prominent than the

---

[10] Martha Graham, "Seeking an American Art of the Dance," in *Revolt in the Arts: A Survey of the Creation, Distribution and Appreciation of Art in America*, ed. Oliver M. Sayler (New York: Brentano's, 1930), 249–55.

[11] "What Dancers Think about the German Dance." *Dance Magazine*, May 1931. Notably, both Graham's and Humphrey's demands for a distinctly American dance counter the work of Denishawn, the dance company of Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn in which both Graham and Humphrey performed before embarking on their choreographic careers. Denishawn particularly drew upon dances of South and East Asia.

[12] For leftist dance in the 1930s and its international interests, see Ellen Graff, *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Mark Franko, *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002); Hannah Kosstrin, *Honest Bodies: Revolutionary Modernism in the Dances of Anna Sokolow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[13] Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*, 6-7.

international concerns of leftist dancers.[14] At the same time, many leftist modern dancers trained in the Big Four's techniques, codifying and redeploying them for their own political purposes.

A progression to an increasingly nationalized definition of modern dance in the 1930s was similarly enacted in *New York Times* critic John Martin's publications during the decade. In his 1933 *The Modern Dance*, based on lectures he gave at The New School in 1931-1932, he held modern dance in opposition to classical ballet rather than placing different nation's modes of it against one another.[15] He devoted much of his writing to the importance of Wigman and her influence. He then used Wigman and Graham as exemplars of the new dance form, collapsing national differences within a larger art form. Martin drastically changed his stance in his 1936 *America Dancing*. In that later text, he argued that American modern dance was distinct from that of other regions of the world and was free from international influence.[16] Martin's 1936 argument worked in two important ways. First, it distanced American modern dance from German influence during a period of increasing recognition of the threat of German fascism. Second, it legitimated the production of dancers and dances that was taking place at Bennington. In other words, by proclaiming modern dance in the US as unique, Martin separated it from connotations of German Nazism and drew attention to domestic modes of developing the art form.

---

[14] Graff, *Stepping Left*. This codification also impacted leftist dance as those artists narrowed the gap between agitprop leftist or communist dance, which allowed for the participation of workers, and bourgeois modern dance, which required training. The Red Scare cut short agitprop leftist dance.
[15] John Martin, *The Modern Dance* (Brooklyn: Dance Horizons, 1933).
[16] John Martin, *America Dancing: The Background and Personalities of the Modern Dance* (New York: Dodge, 1936).

Issues of Americanization and patronage were deeply enmeshed with one another in the 1930s and would continue to be so in the 1940s. As Manning has detailed, modern dance patronage in the 1930s largely fell into either a network dedicated to establishing a distinctly US modern dance or one dedicated to leftist causes.[17] These two networks overlapped as dancers were often part of both or shared some training or performance venues.[18] At the same time, African American dancers "had to improvise patronage of their own at the interstices of existing networks" as well as in commercial dance and theatre.[19] Manning has demonstrated how shifts in patronage structures were concomitant of changes in racial representation on the concert dance stage. The intersecting, inter-reliant, and fragile nature of many of these 1930s patronage streams also set the stage for a financial rupture in the early 1940s.

The network dedicated to a US modern dance for the concert stage in the 1930s largely received funding from dance schools affiliated with companies, Bennington, and other universities that served as dance company affiliates or as performance stops on gymnasium tours. After Martin's lectures at The New School, the university created a recital series in 1935 that proved an important site of sponsorship for modern dance. Following suit, the 92nd Street Young Men's-Young Women's Hebrew Association (92Y) founded a subscription series for dance recitals in 1936. As Naomi Jackson has argued, 92Y's dance subscription series accompanied by its Education Department's dance classes, under the leadership of Dr. William Kolodney, rendered the venue a key site in modern dance's development.[20] Although artists of this network

[17] Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*, 5.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., 4, 7.
[20] Naomi M. Jackson, *Converging Movements: Modern Dance and Jewish Culture at the 92nd Street Y* (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2000).

could rely on several streams of support, Bennington was crucial. As Janet Mansfield Soares and Elizabeth McPherson have shown, the school did not only offer patronage for performances of existing and new work.[21] It also sponsored the training of a new generation of modern dance performers, teachers, and audiences. In addition to aspiring or professional dancers, physical education teachers attended Bennington and later disseminated the techniques and aesthetics they learned to their own classes. Lectures by critics alongside classes and performances by The Big Four instructed Bennington students and audiences in what constituted US modern dance and its importance as an art form. In this way, as Soares argues, Hill could be considered as largely responsible for the codification of US modern dance.[22] Bennington's central role in modern dance patronage came with its own costs. In 1939, feeling the pinch of financial austerity, the institute moved to Mills College in California. It lost many of its participants in this new location far from New York. Consequently, a significant stream of patronage for US modern dance on the concert stage diminished as the decade turned to the 1940s.

The network of modern dance patronage dedicated to leftist causes also gained and lost momentum in the 1930s. The Workers Dance League (1932-1937, renamed New Dance League in 1935) and the Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939) with its short-lived Federal Dance Project (1936-1937) provided funding for leftist dance. The Workers Dance League/New Dance League operated as a booking agency and collective for like-minded modern dancers invested in leftist causes.[23] Many of these performances took place in union halls or at benefits for leftist causes,

---

[21] Janet Mansfield Soares, *Martha Hill and the Making of American Dance* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010); Elizabeth McPherson, *The Bennington School of the Dance: A History in Writings and Interviews* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2013).
[22] Soares, *Martha Hill and the Making of American Dance*.
[23] Stacey Prickett, "From Workers' Dance to New Dance," *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 7, no. 1 (1989): 47–64.

emphasizing the importance of modern dance off the concert stage. The Federal Theatre Project and its semi-autonomous Federal Dance Project were part of the New Deal's Work Projects Administration and offered work for artists. Whereas Workers/New Dance League and the Federal Theatre/Dance Project focused on productions, New Dance Group attended to training as well as performance. Founded in New York's Lower East Side in 1932 by predominantly Jewish women from Holm's company, the Group quickly grew to encompass multiple dance techniques as well as exposure to communist thought. Supported by tuition from the school, New Dance Group provided a performance venue for left-leaning dancers and a field of artists from which they could choose casts. The Group also provided a space for artists of color at a time during which most dance schools were still segregated. Similar to the patronage story of US modern dance for the concert stage, momentum of the early through mid-1930s diminished at the end of the decade for patronage of leftist modern dance.

Leftist patronage systems of the 1930s underwent reorganization or termination due to an aesthetic shift and Red Scare, in which the state targeted assumed communists, at the end of the decade. As Ellen Graff has shown, the gap between agitprop leftist dance aimed at workers' unions, which was supported by the Workers/New Dance League, and bourgeois modern dance directed towards the concert stage narrowed throughout the 1930s.[24] New Dance Group was enmeshed in both of these spheres as many of its members were also part of The Big Four's companies. Their technical refinement in service of leftist messages overtook previous agitprop efforts featuring quotidian movement. By the end of the decade, New Dance League merged

[24] Graff, *Stepping Left*.

with other leftist efforts and largely dissolved into those venues.[25] Unlike Bennington and its contractions going into the 1940s, New Dance Group continued to strengthen and provide funding for modern dance. However, its repertoire lost some of its communist ethos in the shadow of a Red Scare. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was founded under the leadership of Martin Dies in 1938 as part of an effort to investigate supposed communists and disloyal citizens, including those in the Works Project Administration. Many modern dancers fell into its purview as the art form had long been a haven for communists, leftists, and queer individuals. The impact of HUAC was so great that it contributed to the collapse of the Federal Dance Project because the group supported so many assumed communist or leftist dancers. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt then allowed Federal Theatre Project to close in order to save the remainder of the Works Project Administration. By the dawn of the 1940s, New Dance Group was the major patron of leftist dance remaining, though with a softened stance from its 1930s agenda. Its enmeshment with modern dancers on the concert stage positioned it next to Bennington and university or performance venues as key patrons of US modern dance.

As the two major networks for modern dance patronage diminished and merged, fewer resources were available for artists. Modern dance faced two key crises in the 1940s: a financial one and a political one. These crises fueled a distinction and unraveling between theatricalism and formalist abstraction. The financial crisis rendered modern dance in opposition to commercially successful performance venues, especially Broadway. Spurred by wartime financial austerity, Martin wrote in the 1939-1940 season that modern dance needed subsidies to

[25] Prickett, "From Workers' Dance to New Dance."

survive.[26] He allowed that some artists, such as Graham, managed to build audiences for their companies. However, most dancers, according to Martin, could not do so largely because they balanced between dance as an "autonomous form," or absolute dance, and as a "choric theatre art."[27] This divide between dance as a complete art form in and of itself and dance as part of a theatrical production was echoed in Martin's assertion that "to insist, even tacitly, that [modern dance] must earn its way commercially or perish is to take upon oneself a burden of responsibility to American culture that is not to be lightly assumed."[28] In this essay, he implied a binary between modern dance and commercial entertainment. This distinction between the medium-specificity of absolute dance and commercial theatricalism was indicative of Broadway's growing presence in the purview of modern dancers during the 1940s.

The second, political crisis began at the end of the war as the decade gave way to the Cold War. The Red Scare and the Lavender Scare, in which the state targeted assumed queer individuals, at this time caused many modern dance community members to obfuscate their identities. State surveillance and name-calling of supposed communists brought about an effort for modern dancers and critics to refuse the presence of possibly subversive meanings in their works. Formalist abstraction presented an artistic freedom in movement for the sake of movement. The intersection of these two modern dance crises—financial and political—highlighted the generative possibilities and precarious liabilities of both theatricalism and formalist abstraction as it disentangled the two aesthetics. The rise of Broadway accentuated the potential for theatrical modern dance and the Red and Lavender Scares did the same for formalist

---

[26] Martin, "A Crisis in the Dance."
[27] Ibid., 119.
[28] Ibid., 116-117.

abstraction. These accentuations enacted a split between the two aesthetics that had previously been intertwined in modern dance. Although both the tense relationship between Broadway and modern dance as well as the political benefits of abstraction picked up momentum in the mid- to late 1940s, both of these issues were theorized by dancers and critics earlier in the decade.

In the early 1940s, modern dance stakeholders demonstrated an investment in moving the field towards formalist abstraction. In "Does Modern Dance Have a Future?" an unpublished essay written for the 1940-1941 dance season at 92Y, Kolodney argued that dancers should abandon theatricalism. The opening of his essay summarized this stance:

> The modern dance has a future if it dares to be itself. At least, that is what audiences at the YMHA have told me in one way or another, for the past four years. The audience said so in many ways—by its intense absorption in the more abstract phases of the program; by its disdain of the dancers' attempts to be theatrical; by its almost ritualistic and kinesthetic response to every authentic dance movement; by its boredom with sheer acrobatics; by its deeper understanding of those modern dance compositions that bear repetition year after year. The dance can and must be itself if it is to retain the audience which is loyal to this form of art. If I am to judge by the most recent recitals, it seems that the dance is trying to be too clear—clear to everybody, so clear that the man in the street will not mistake its meaning, almost as clear as Edgar Guest.[29]

[29] William Kolodney, "Does the Modern Dance Have a Future?," 1941-1942, Events, Education Department, Box 3, Dance Teachers' Advisory Committee 1941-42 Folder, 92nd Street Y Archives. Guest was a British-born United States poet who wrote accessibly about quotidian life.

Kolodney used spectator responses to theatrical and abstract dance as evidence for his argument. He then indicated that modern dance should not be accessible to those not privy to its conventions. His report of spectators' responses, though, was of questionable veracity. Dance reviews written by 92Y members for their member bulletin between 1936 and 1941 did not support Kolodney's contention. In fact, 92Y member critics consistently praised theatrical pieces more than those deemed abstract. Kolodney exhibited more interest in claiming a distinct audience for modern dance than in accurate accounts of how individual spectators responded to different choreographies. He saw the ambiguity of formalist abstraction as a means to protect modern dance from those outside of it in order to continue it. Whereas Martin saw subsidies as necessary for modern dance's survival, Kolodney thought ambiguity was the answer for its future. This strategy would also enable Kolodney to set his 92Y dance season in opposition to Broadway venues. His audience might have been smaller than that of Broadway, but it would have been clearly defined and continually refined. Kolodney sought not to cater to a large, general audience akin to that for a commercially successful Broadway production, but to hone a discerning audience for abstract, absolute dance.[30]

Joseph Campbell, mythologist, dance writer, and Erdman's husband, also made a case against representation and narrative in dance in favor of a formalist approach. He took his argument a step further than Kolodney and also contended that dance should not engage in political meanings. In a two-part *Dance Observer* article, Campbell made a case for the "presentational" over the "discoursive."[31] The presentational, for Campbell, showcased

---

[30] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, [1979] 2013). Kolodney's way of defining aesthetic taste in ways inextricably connected to social class resonates with Bourdieu's later concept of distinction.
[31] Joseph Campbell, "Text, or Idea?," *Dance Observer* 11, no. 6 (1944): 66.

technique for the sake of technique. The discoursive, in contrast, he characterized as "didactic, intellectualistic, nonvisual, nonjoyous principle: the principle of Herr Professor at the Blackboard and Mr. Senator on the Stump."[32] In other words, Campbell wished for the dancer to move away from theatrical narratives that present psychoanalytical lessons or political and social commentary in favor of an adherence to the form and technique of modern dance. He claimed that "dance, of all arts, is perhaps the least well adapted to subtle, or even persuasive social criticism."[33] Campbell's critique of theatricalism and political commentary in modern dance was tied to a seemingly sexist separation of the mind and body. He remarked, "who can but wonder why our dancer has to be letting the insipidities of her unimpressive brain come between the fountain-source of her genius and the marvel of that all-expressive body on which she has been laboring the better part of her life."[34] This vision of the most important aspect of a female dancer to be her body in service of movement anticipated the 1940s rise of both formalist abstraction and male choreographers.

In Kolodney's and Campbell's desires for dancers to engage in the material aspects unique to modern dance, they implicitly put dance in conversation with trends in visual art, particularly art critic Greenberg's call for medium specificity. In his oft-cited 1961 essay "Modernist Painting," Greenberg argued that "the unique and proper areas of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in its medium."[35] In other words, an artist could and should seek to excel in whatever renders her art form unique from others. Greenberg started this call for medium specificity over twenty years prior to "Modernist Painting" with his 1940

---

[32] Ibid.
[33] Joseph Campbell, "Betwixt the Cup and the Lip," *Dance Observer* 11, no. 3 (1944): 30.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Art and Culture; Critical Essays.* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 86.

"Towards a Newer Laocoon." In this earlier essay, he warned against an art form imitating another instead of adhering to characteristics that rendered it unique. When this imitation or absorption of one art to another occurred, "a confusion of the arts results, by which the subservient ones are perverted and distorted."[36] For Greenberg, this distortion of an artistic medium also caused a minimization of that medium's idiosyncrasies in favor of its representational or narrative content. As he explained this consequence, "all emphasis is taken away from the medium and transferred to subject matter."[37] Writing within four years of one another, Kolodney, Campbell, and Greenberg cohered in their desire for an emphasis on medium specificity and move away from considerations of an art piece's subject matter. In the case of modern dance, this ideology positioned movement technique as of prime importance.

Dance critics' writings increasingly reflected medium specificity's preference for dance technique free from overt meaning as the 1940s progressed. For instance, the decade witnessed a shift in dance criticism when Denby joined the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1942. He abandoned evaluative criticism, in which meaning and merit of a dance work were interpreted, in favor of a criticism based in description of formal elements of the work. Margaret Lloyd's 1949 statement "there are no reds in modern dance today" served as another example of critics' moves away from interpretation.[38] More than evidence of some dancers' moves away from political commentary or a denial of communist sympathies in the field, Lloyd's assertion functioned as part and parcel of a move to present modern dance as free from potentially subversive meanings and individual positionalities. This maneuver often required a withholding of interpretation in

---

[36] Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," in *Pollock and after: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Frascina, 2nd ed (London; New York: Routledge, [1940] 2000), 36.
[37] Ibid., 37.
[38] Margaret Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance.* (Brooklyn: Knopf, 1949), 173.

favor of a focus on movement for the sake of movement. The frequency and force of New York artists' and critics' preference for formalist abstraction steadily increased throughout the 1940s. The timing of these calls to medium specificity and, concomitantly, formalist abstraction indicated that critics and choreographers of New York modern dance sought to distance themselves from representational modes that could be seen as too politically motivated and related to aesthetics that might be read as fascist or communist. Despite the nuances between different critics' contentions and justifications, formalist abstraction for all of them entailed a protective ambiguity. The formalist dancer could not be easily read by anyone. Attempts to claim that she danced subversive content could be rebutted with appeals to abstract movement exploration. These understandings of formalist abstraction did not take into account uses of abstraction that were not motivated by movement for the sake of movement, but that allowed or encouraged interpretations of meaning, such as those of Erdman and Shearer.

As the Red Scare and Lavender Scare gained momentum in the late 1940s, communist or left-leaning modern dancers turned away from performing those ideologies and to other dance genres or postulations of their work as depersonalized movement. For example, Primus was thought to be a member of the Communist Party by state authorities and her work triggered the FBI to create a file on her. The file's contents, including Primus's personal information, dance descriptions, as well as reports given by her contemporaries to the FBI, elucidated the multi-faceted nature of the Red Scare and the ways in which one could not assume protection by her colleagues.[39] A 1949 Rosenwald Fellowship enabled Primus to travel to Africa and re-direct her career towards West African dance and culture. This change also rendered her as in line with

[39] Federal Bureau of Investigation, "FBI File on Pearl Primus," 1944-1969.

ethnic dance and, as such, less likely to be seen by critics and the state as a choreographer of communist works. Similarly, Maslow largely abandoned her overt socialist or communist dance content in the end of the 1940s. Instead, she focused on Jewish-themed dances that could be interpreted as ethnic dance and as promoting a Jewish pride, not communism. The growing field of ethnic dance provided a site through which leftist modern dancers could reconfigure their repertoires and maneuver through their political climate.

For other dancers, a focus on depersonalization or dehumanization of movement rendered their work able to circumvent assignations of communist and/or queer meanings. Cunningham and Nikolais, for example, positioned their choreography as beyond representational meaning. This manifested for Cunningham in medium specificity aided by chance composition techniques that muddied issues of authorship. Nikolais did not engage medium specificity as he employed objects that challenged conventional definitions of a dancing body. In this object/body, though, he conducted a mode of dehumanization. Despite their differences, critics hailed Cunningham and Nikolais as indicative of a new modern dance that prioritized depersonalized movement.[40]

When defining formalist abstraction as a step away from theatricalism, critics focused on depersonalization and the technical innovations allowed by that new mode of dancing. Cohen wrote of this transition from representational to depersonalized, avant-garde dance in her 1961 "Avant-Garde Choreography." She explained, "in the 1940s [avant-garde choreographers] found the dance becoming too literal, verging too close to the boundary that distinguishes it from drama. […] The dancer's movement reveals the essence of humanity; it is evocative rather than

---

[40] Cohen, "Avant-Garde Choreography"; Cohen, *The Modern Dance*; Johnston, "The New American Modern Dance."

representational."[41] Cohen defined formalist abstract choreographers, whom she qualified as "avant-garde," as a distinct break from the theatricality of 1940s works that relied upon representation or text. Jill Johnston, writing in 1965, challenged interpretations of Cunningham's work as dehumanized while also championing the dehumanized aspects of Nikolais's repertoire. Still, she allowed that one could easily interpret Cunningham's dance as dehumanized because "gone were the old connections and transitions between representational gestures."[42] Both Cohen's and Johnston's analyses underscored the importance and desirability of dance premised on movement for the sake of movement. Don McDonagh picked up on these threads in 1970. He surmised, "when the more recent choreographers freed themselves of stories and began to work with dances from moment to moment without literary strictures, the first thing that happened is that many found that they could use the proscenium stage more imaginatively."[43] McDonagh identified an innovation allowed by neglecting narrative or representation. His writing implied a departure from fourth wall staging conventions that modern dance shared with its contemporary realist theatre. These various tenets distinguished by Cohen, Johnston, and McDonagh all depicted a modern dance that was separate from theatre and Broadway. Additionally, that modern dance could neatly fit into aesthetic imperatives of the Cold War.

It is important to note that although formalist abstract works of the postwar avant-garde might have been advertised as carrying a multiplicity of possible or ambiguous meanings, that resistance to overt meaning was debatable. Recent dance scholarship has re-assessed what had been classified as abstract dance during the postwar period. These scholars have used archival

---

[41] Cohen, "Avant-Garde Choreography," 33.
[42] Johnston, "The New American Modern Dance," 172.
[43] Don McDonagh, *The Rise and Fall and Rise of Modern Dance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), 203.

materials in conjunction with the benefit of hindsight to find many dances supposedly beyond meaning as deeply engaged in autobiographical, political, or otherwise theatrical intentions. For example, Kowal assessed postwar modern dance and found ways in which choreographers used the body to take political stances even in purportedly abstract dances.[44] Carrie Noland and Daniel Callahan both revised previous Cunningham scholarship and identified a wealth of meaning and theatrical techniques in his work.[45] These scholars' revisionary accounts clarified the ways in which Cold War aesthetics could be adhered to a choreographer's work without her active participation in them. The rise of formalist abstraction in the 1940s—whether viewed through the lens of those dancers and their critics or through that of recent dance scholarship—highlighted such dance in relation to theatrical techniques, especially in the use of text.

Amidst the non-linear transition from theatricalism to formalist abstraction in the 1940s, dancers and critics wrote extensively about the place (or lack thereof) of text in modern dance. In 1944, dancer and dance writer Robert Horan published an article in *Dance Observer* in response to Campbell's essay for the publication. Horan argued "the real problem [of modern dance] is the relation of dance to its theater materials."[46] He juxtaposed "abstract" dance without text and "theater" dance with it. Dance with text, he explained, must "consist in the conscious manipulation of word and movement to form a single theatrical effect, instead of entirely separate effects."[47] In other words, text ought to only be used in dance if the two cohere in a singular dramatic experience and meaning. Notably, Horan considered works that used text and

---

[44] Kowal, *How to Do Things with Dance*.
[45] Carrie Noland, *Merce Cunningham: After the Arbitrary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); Daniel M. Callahan, "The Gay Divorce of Music and Dance: Choreomusicality and the Early Works of Cage-Cunningham," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 71, no. 2 (August 1, 2018): 439–525.
[46] Horan, "Poverty and Poetry in Dance."
[47] Ibid.

dance in incoherent ways as akin to the place of modern dancers on Broadway—not fully integrated or using their talents.[48] Dancer and writer Gertrude Lippincott, too, questioned the relationship between dance and theatre with an emphasis on text in her 1947 "Will Modern Dance Become Legend." She remarked, "more and more, modern dancers have ventured into the realm of theater. They have made extensive experiments combining the spoken word with dance."[49] For Lippincott, this move to a theatre technique of text integration, as well as dancers' transitions to the Broadway stage, gave rise to a question on modern dance's survival as an art form. Her article revealed the stakes of the text-in-modern-dance conundrum.

As formalist abstraction and theatrical modern dance became disentangled throughout the 1940s, US modern dance entered an ontological crisis. Stakeholders in the field needed to ask whether modern dance could contain text or whether that only belonged on Broadway. This conversation was not distinct to New York. Dance critics and audiences in Chicago, too, debated the merits of text-based theatricalism and formalist abstraction.[50] Chicago, in contrast to New York, preferred the former due to the city's precedent for dance theatre in the works of Ruth Page, Katherine Dunham, and its warm reception of Graham's text-based works.[51] Text, among other theatre techniques, had long been used in modern dance. The growing importance of

[48] Ibid.
[49] Lippincott, "Will Modern Dance Become Legend?"
[50] For examples of Chicago's theatricalism versus formalism debate, see Cecil Smith, "Young Dancers Give Program Empty of Merit," *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963); Chicago, Ill.*, February 15, 1943; Claudia Cassidy, "Five Dancers Collaborate in Varied Recital," *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963); Chicago, Ill.*, May 10, 1943.
[51] For Chicago's preference for text-based theatricalism in contrast to abstract modern dance, see Jessica Friedman, "Theatricalism versus Formalism: Jean Erdman and Merce Cunningham in Chicago," in *Dancing on the Third Coast*, ed. Susan Manning and Lizzie Leopold (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, Expected 2024).

movement exploration void of meaning, though, brought theatrical techniques to the fore and questioned their place in the field versus on Broadway.

By the 1950s, formalist abstraction and ostensibly universalist choreography came to represent US modern dance, a mode of performance distinct from Broadway. Modern dancers targeted by the Red Scare and the Lavender Scare benefitted from this separation. Naima Prevots, Gay Morris, Kowal, Clare Croft, and Victoria Phillips have all demonstrated how claims of abstract universality served artists who inhabited what could be considered by the state as subversive identities.[52] These scholars place formalist abstraction's (also termed by some as objectivism or universalism) key moment of emergence as tied to the Cold War. For example, from the 1950s through the 1970s, the State Department's American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA) panel selected dance companies for tours abroad. ANTA sought companies that would present American culture as emblematic of freedom without engaging in practices that might be considered subversive. Formalist abstraction presented an artistic freedom in movement for the sake of movement without drifting so far away from canonical modern dance of the late 1930s that it could be controversial. This was why they did not select choreographers, such as Merce Cunningham with his paradigmatic shift to chance composition that broke far away from modern dance precedent. As Phillips and James Moreno have demonstrated, when ANTA chose choreographers who also featured theatrical dances, such as Graham or José Limón, they were able to position those works in such a way that could take on universal

[52] Naima Prevots, *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012); Gay Morris, *A Game for Dancers: Performing Modernism in the Postwar Years, 1945-1960* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006); Kowal, *How to Do Things with Dance*; Clare Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Victoria Phillips, *Martha Graham's Cold War: The Dance of American Diplomacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

meanings while also representing artistic freedom and democracy in the United States.[53] The incomplete nature of formalist abstraction's aesthetic dominance calls attention to the ways in which its separation from theatricalism was a strategic decision of modern dance artists, critics, and producers, not a clean and organic break.

While I concur with the arguments put forward by Prevots, Morris, Kowal, Croft, and Phillips, I intervene in narratives of formalist abstraction by positioning its key moment of emergence as what I term the "aesthetic disentanglement" it underwent from theatricalism in the 1940s due to modern dance's financial crisis. Indeed, formalist abstraction took on additional nuances as the Cold War advanced. However, it served an important role in the 1940s as modern dance stakeholders held it as demonstrative of a pure, absolute modern dance in stark opposition to that engaged in theatricalism, especially on Broadway. In this way, this dissertation focuses on the 1940s while also demonstrating how patronage shifts that started in the late 1930s impacted Cold War aesthetics in the 1950s.

***

Changes and Continuances in Presentational Frame

US modern dance's 1940 financial crisis accelerated dancers' breaks from The Big Four's companies. The collapse of the Federal Dance Project in 1937 preceded the closure of the Hanya Holm Dance Company in 1941. In 1945, both the Humphrey-Weidman Company and (Helen) Tamiris and Her Group disbanded.[54] At the same time as financial support for large-

---

[53] Phillips, *Martha Graham's Cold War*; James Moreno, *Dances of José Limón and Erick Hawkins* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2020).
[54] Pauline Tish, "Helen Tamiris," Jewish Women's Archive, accessed January 26, 2023, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/tamiris-helen.

scale companies was waning, dance performance venues provided avenues for artists to emerge from those companies or schools and develop careers on their own. In a cyclical relation, the departure of key dancers from The Big Four's companies accelerated the instability of those companies. The 1940s built upon the 1930s' momentum of modern dance soloists-choreographers who built upon their training from The Big Four and went into performance venues on their own. Bennington provided opportunities for dancers of The Big Four's companies to perform small recitals of their own choreography. *Dance Observer*, a modern dance periodical, made a short-lived attempt to work as an impresario by sponsoring recitals at the Humphrey-Weidman studio beginning in 1942. They selected new choreographers who were affiliated with, or recently left, The Big Four. Beginning in the 1942-1943 season, 92Y provided space and stature for aspiring choreographers through its dance subscription series and Audition Winners' Recital, both of which enabled new artists to access the audiences of those more established. New Dance Group offered numerous performance opportunities. Group members with choreographic ambitions could show their work at small programs or have a piece included in a larger concert with more experienced choreographers. Although emerging choreographers could take advantage of these ways to show their work, embarking on choreographic careers entailed artistic risk.

These emergent artists maintained The Big Four's techniques, though with individual variations, and innovated in ways that troubled the line between recognizability and newness. Their continuance of existing techniques could be considered as the reason for which some early

dance scholars, such as Johnston, Cohen, and Banes, saw the decade as one of stagnation.[55] These artists did not experience a pressing need to craft an entirely new technique. They had access to many techniques in training venues that also enabled those modes of moving to cross-fertilize. For example, New Dance Group offered classes in techniques of The Big Four, ethnic dance, ballet, and those of various guest artists. As dancers took from this wide range of classes, they could experience a satisfying variety that curtailed needs to innovate new techniques. Bennington also fostered technical cross-fertilization as performers and students took classes across The Big Four and learned from one another.[56] In 1945, Dunham opened her Katherine Dunham School of Dance in New York, providing another training program that offered a diversity of techniques and an interracial environment. As Joanna Dee Das has explained, Dunham offered classes in her own technique, other dance techniques, and academic topics.[57] Although the codification of modern dance that took place in the 1930s continued through these training programs in the 1940s, dancers were less limited to one particular technique than they were when a company's school was the primary mode of professional dance education. In other words, many dancers in the 1940s—such as the women of this dissertation—made their marks on existing techniques, but did not face an urgent need to create a training regime of their own during the decade.

The cohort of women examined in this dissertation—Collins, Primus, Maslow, Gentry, Erdman, and Shearer—used recognizable techniques while also choreographing within existing

---

[55] Johnston, "The New American Modern Dance"; Cohen, "Avant-Garde Choreography"; Cohen, *The Modern Dance*; Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*.
[56] Soares, *Martha Hill and the Making of American Dance*; McPherson, *The Bennington School of the Dance*.
[57] Joanna Dee Das, *Katherine Dunham: Dance and the African Diaspora* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

presentational frames. At various moments in the 1940s, the solo recital frame, Americana frame, and abstraction as Americanist frame all stood as emblematic of US modern dance. These frames were not new in the decade, but built upon precedent set in earlier years. As these frames were practiced in the early through mid-twentieth century, they accrued resonances and sets of meanings separate from the artists who used them. As prominent modes of presenting US modern dance for the concert stage, these frames also held power in shaping ideas of Americanness and American bodies on stage. Primus, Collins, Maslow, Gentry, Erdman, and Shearer all used established techniques and presentational frames in such a way that infused them with their individual aesthetic and political motivations. In doing so, they intervened in definitions of Americanness in US modern dance. Although they each worked in distinct ways, they cohered in their centering of women and in their ways of pointing to the artificiality of national identity and borders. They crafted new visions of American bodies while refusing the limitations of national demarcations.

Solo Recital Frame

A history of US modern dance attests to the power of solo female bodies onstage. In particular, Ruth St. Denis, Duncan, and Loïe Fuller achieved recognition as solo artists even when performing their solos in recitals that included ensembles. These early modern dancers defined US modern dance as a proto-feminist field revolving around the power of the female body onstage. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they danced on precarious grounds as they broke from Victorian conventions for the female body. These women choreographed physical and rhetorical ways of positioning their work that enabled them to circumvent Victorian proscriptions while also advancing their aesthetic practices. For example,

St. Denis tempered notions of her dance, which drew upon South and East Asian practices, as too sexual by explaining her choreography as research while also mediating the Orientalist nature of her work for white audiences through her white body.[58] Duncan mitigated a stir caused by her bare legs and uncorseted torso with appeals to Hellenistic discourse and contemporary social and scientific theory.[59] For Fuller, dance productions and inventions she created for them served as a means through which to attempt to claim rights as a property-holding citizen.[60] Although these strategies enabled St. Denis, Duncan, and Fuller to advance as artists as well as to stake claims for a post-Victorian womanhood, these women also further marginalized subjects of color by co-opting their aesthetic labor, positioning their aesthetic practices as primitive, or placing Orientalizing practices of the commercial stage as part and parcel of the concert dance stage, respectively. These pioneering modern dancers set a precedent for the crucial role of solos as sites for negotiations of race, gender, and modern dance stardom.

The adaptability of the solo recital frame in following thematic trends of modern dance enabled it to take on a myriad of meanings while always centering a singular body onstage. Through these changing trends, solos increasingly came to function as a means through which a dancer could prove herself as an artist. As Claudia Gitelman explained about this relationship between solos and modern dance history, "soloists ignited the modern dance movement and they

[58] Jane Desmond, "Dancing out the Difference: Cultural Imperialism and Ruth St. Denis's 'Radha' of 1906," *Signs* 17, no. 1 (Autumn 1991): 28–49; Suzanne Shelton, *Divine Dancer: A Biography of Ruth St. Denis* (New York: Doubleday, 1981); Priya Srinivasan, "The Bodies beneath the Smoke, or What's behind the Cigarette Poster: Unearthing Kinesthetic Connections in U.S. Modern Dance," *Discourses in Dance* 4, no. 1 (2007): 7–48.
[59] Ann Daly, *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011).
[60] Anthea Kraut, "White Womanhood, Property Rights, and the Campaign for Choreographic Copyright: Loïe Fuller's Serpentine Dance," *Dance Research Journal* 43, no. 1 (ed 2011): 3–26; Anthea Kraut, *Choreographing Copyright: Race, Gender, and Intellectual Property Rights in American Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

have been a source of its constant renewal, inhabiting space between the new and the not-yet-known."[61] A crucial part of that "not-yet-known" was the impact of aspiring dancers, seeking to contribute their own take on established presentational frames in the field.

The solo recital frame's sparse material needs rendered it particularly adaptable in the face of shifting aesthetic imperatives. For instance, solos fulfilled the needs of leftist dancers during the reorganization of leftist or communist dance groups into bourgeois, highly trained modern dance.[62] In making this transformation, leftist dancers could utilize the solo frame in much greater ways than allowed by the mass crowds of previous venues for their dance. In so doing, they could simultaneously prove themselves and their technique as appropriate for the concert stage. Similarly, the 1930s witnessed a trend towards Americana and American nationalist works. An analysis of Graham's successful *Frontier* solo (1935) demonstrates how the solo frame could take on particular ideological resonances.

In *Frontier: American Perspective of the Plains*, Graham paid homage to a pioneer woman and presented a vision of westward expansion. She moved expansively as she traveled away from a fenced boundary, taking new territory into her kinesphere.[63] Overlapping with the Americana frame, this solo enacted a close relationship between a singular woman's body and a sense of nation. As Arabella Stanger has argued, the solo resonated with its contemporary federal Indian Reorganization Act's language of land ownership by staging "a burgeoning sensation of

---

[61] Claudia Gitelman, "Introduction," in *On Stage Alone: Soloists and the Modern Dance Canon*, ed. Claudia Gitelman and Barbara Palfy (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 1–6.
[62] For more on this transition, see Graff, *Stepping Left*.
[63] For more on Martha Graham's dances of US American national identity during this period, see Jacqueline Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Mark Franko, *Martha Graham in Love and War: The Life in the Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

land possession as the site for a white feminine agency."[64] Louis Horst's score for the piece contributed to a sense of agential conquest. Its pulse marched forward as Graham repeated phrases of sharp battements to take her further into the land beyond her fence scenescape designed by Isamu Noguchi. *Frontier* built on examples set by previous modern dancers, such as Wigman with her particular representations and interventions in German national identity or Shawn with his nativist approaches to Americanness, who articulated a connection between modern dance and national formation.[65] Graham's *Frontier* contributed to a precedent for the ways in which a woman's modern dance solo could intervene in understandings of national identity and inhabiting a nation. Slightly later leftist solos, such as Jane Dudley's *Harmonica Breakdown* protest against sharecropping (1938), continued to build on that example with an attention to racial injustices within the US. *Frontier* demonstrates how spectators could reasonably expect and interpret a woman's modern dance solo as a means of staking a claim in definitions of the Americanness within US modern dance.

In addition to the interpretive possibilities of solos and solo recitals, the frame was a financially viable option after the onset of modern dance's 1940 financial crisis. As a presentational frame that only required one person, self-choreographed solos proved an apt means through which aspiring modern dancers could audition for roles in established companies or embark on their own choreographic careers. The cost of renting a performance venue, though, prevented many up-and-coming dancers from producing their own solo recitals. 92Y identified

[64] Arabella Stanger, *Dancing on Violent Ground: Utopia as Dispossession in Euro-American Theater Dance* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021).
[65] For nationalism or national ideology in the works of Wigman and Shawn, see Susan Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon: The Dances of Mary Wigman*, Second Edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Paul A. Scolieri, *Ted Shawn: His Life, Writings, and Dances* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), respectively.

and sought to fill the need of aspiring dancers to have a place in which to showcase themselves and their solos. Consequently, 92Y founded the annual Audition Winners' Recital in 1942 and held its first performance in 1943. In some ways, this program attempted to fill the gap left by the collapse of the Federal Dance Project and the patronage reorganization accelerated by modern dance's 1940 financial crisis. 92Y's dance teachers' advisory committee auditioned hopefuls for one of typically five spots to showcase usually two to five solos in the recital. They framed the Audition Winners' Recital as operating with "the express purpose of helping young unknown dancers to further their careers."[66] In addition to that noble goal, the recital provided ticket income for 92Y as it entailed few expenses to offset (they typically paid each performer a very small "artist's fee" for the purpose of hiring an accompanist and provided dancers with minimal lighting and a plain curtain backdrop).[67] It also enabled the institution to promote itself as *the* venue in which aspiring modern dancers should seek to perform.

92Y's venture immediately took off with artists clamoring to audition and writing to Kolodney, asking for an opportunity to be in the recital.[68] As *Dance Magazine*'s Doris Hering detailed in a 1946 article on the history of the Audition Winners' Recital, the event enabled dancers to offset the significant financial, artistic, and personal risks of staging their own solo recitals.[69] Although auditions were open to dancers of all geographic regions and dance forms,

---

[66] "Dance Audition Winners, '42-'50 at Y on March 4." *The "Y" Bulletin*. February 28, 1941. 92 Y Bulletin Archive.
[67] William Kolodney to Pearl Primus, "Letter from William Kolodney to Pearl Primus," November 23, 1942, Events, Education Department, 92nd Street Y Archives. For the 1943 recital in which Pearl Primus performed, each dancer was given $35.00 for the purpose of hiring an accompanist.
[68] 92Y's archives contain numerous examples of dancers', including Sybil Shearer's, correspondence with Kolodney about an opportunity in the recital.
[69] Doris Hering, "Audition!," Dance Magazine, January 1946, 20, 37.

the recital's judges favored New York-based modern dancers.[70] The Audition Winners' Recital positioned 92Y as *the* venue; New York as *the* city; and the self-choreographed solo as *the* presentational frame in which one could prove herself as a US modern dancer. It built upon momentum for the importance of solos brought about by early twentieth century pioneering modern dancers and 1930s modern dance trends while also mitigating impacts of the 1940 financial crisis. Many dancers, including Primus and Collins, utilized the 92Y Audition Winners' Recital and the legacy it created for soloists to prove themselves as US modern dancers.

Primus and Collins used the solo recital frame in ways similar to one another, though to varying results. They both centered their lived experiences as African American women alongside those of African Americans with vastly different life conditions than their own, such as those confronting Jim Crow laws in the South every day. The women also engaged in cartographic projects through their solo recitals. They presented visions of Afro-diasporic routes and roots that extended across Africa, North America, the Caribbean, and Europe. These mappings enabled Primus to join her political protest and commentary into transnational leftist causes and allowed Collins to demonstrate a capacious definition of Afro-diasporic aesthetic practices that included European modes of dance resonant with her French Creole heritage. In centering these diasporic mappings in their solo dancing bodies, their interventions align with Nadine George-Graves's concept of diasporic spidering, a process that "allows for many different points of intersection and modes of passage to be woven together around a central core—the individual searcher/journeyer."[71] Primus and Collins choreographed processes in

---

[70] Ibid.
[71] Nadine George-Graves, "Diasporic Spidering: Constructing Contemporary Black Identities," in *Black Performance Theory*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 33–44.

which disparate political and aesthetic sites could be held in tandem within a solo dancing body. In so doing, both women faced critics' negotiations of their race. As D. Soyini Madison writes, "solo black women attend to the fact of blackness and the hauntings of black female abjection. *When and where she enters her race enters with her*."[72] Primus and Collins attended to ways in which Blackness had previously been received on the concert dance stage, including how white modern dancers had constructed representations of African American lives, and how their own bodies signified.

Both Primus and Collins danced in conversation with shifting modes of racial representation during the 1940s. During the wartime mobilization of the early through mid-1940s, Primus took part in a growing presence of African American self-representation on the concert dance stage. As Manning has shown, this period moved away from dominant critics' assumptions of African American dancers as either natural performers or derivative artists.[73] Crucially, according to Manning, Primus and her contemporary African American modern dancers challenged the categories of "modern dance" and "Negro dance" as they brought critics to reckon with Blackness on the concert dance stage.[74] With her solos, Primus was viewed by critics in terms of her Blackness, but in such a way that questioned the contours of racial representation in a distinctly theatrical modern dance. Collins's solo recitals took place at the end of the 1940s. In contrast to Primus, she was largely viewed by critics as beyond racial representation on the concert stage—and, therefore, beyond Primus—due to her light skin tone and uses of ballet and Jewish content. In ways that both erased and reified her Blackness, critics

---

[72] D. Soyini Madison, "Foreword," in *Solo/Black/Woman: Scripts, Interviews, and Essays*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), xi–xiv [emphasis in original].
[73] Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*.
[74] Ibid.

neutralized her specifically Afro-diasporic or protest work in such a way that fit her roughly into Cold War aesthetics' preference for formalist abstraction. In addition to changes in acceptance and artistic authority achieved by African American artists in the 1940s, perceptions of Blackness on the modern dance stage were impacted by the decade's negotiation between theatricalism and formalist abstraction.

Chapter 1 analyzes Primus's and Collins's uses of the self-choreographed solo and solo recital presentational frame. It traces the two artists as each trained, danced, and spoke about their work as soloists. In journeying through Primus's and Collins's diasporic mappings, this chapter follows their bodies into wartime mobilization and its allowance for theatricalism as well as into Cold War aesthetics and its imperatives for formalist abstraction. It also picks up Manning's analysis of racial representation in the 1940s to examine how the decade's aesthetic disentanglement impacted, and was impacted by, that of modern dance and "Negro dance" for African American dancers. This chapter argues that through their solos and solo recitals, Primus and Collins carved space for themselves and for Afro-diasporic, transnationally resonant, political and cultural content in US modern dance. They did so amidst shifting definitions of Blackness on the concert dance stage in relation to the disentanglement of theatricalism and formalist abstraction.

The Americana Frame

US modern dance during the mid-1930s through mid-1940s re-imagined and re-embodied national identity through its Americana frame. Although pioneering US modern dancers had utilized Americana themes in dance and writing, artists' attempts in the 1930s to claim modern dance in the US as distinct from that of other geographic regions accelerated the Americana

frame's growth. Due in part to the impossibility of neatly defining a national identity for the US, the Americana frame manifested in a multiplicity of (sometimes contradictory) ways. Despite its inexactness, the frame could be identified by attention to some combination of land in connection to possibility, heroes and villains in a specifically US context, or nostalgic longings for a particular vision of the US. Similar to the solo recital frame, the Americana frame's malleability enabled its proliferation and longevity.

The Americana frame gained traction among modern dancers of the concert stage, left-leaning artists, ballet, and Broadway. For instance, Shawn and his male dancers exhibited a nativist and queerly hypermasculine sense of Americanness in their early modern dance. Humphrey with her *The Shakers* (1930) and Graham in her *Primitive Mysteries* (1931) choreographed subdued, ceremony-like imaginings of the Shakers' and Southwest Indigenous peoples' spiritual traditions, respectively. In 1936, ballet impresario Lincoln Kirstein founded Ballet Caravan, a touring group dedicated to American choreographers and often Americana themes. For example, Eugene Loring's *Billy the Kid* (1938) for Ballet Caravan, with a libretto by Kirstein and score by Aaron Copeland, presented the show's titular notorious cowboy and his comrades. Agnes de Mille, who traversed modern dance, ballet, and Broadway, picked up similar western and cowboy/cowgirl themes in her ballet *Rodeo* (1942) and Broadway production *Oklahoma* (1943). Left-leaning modern dancers used Americana themes in such a way that pointed to social injustices. Jewish American artists Sophie Maslow and Eve Gentry, the focus of Chapter 2, took part in these leftist Americana critiques. Among the numerous Americana dances produced in the first half of the twentieth century, de Mille's *Oklahoma* and Graham's

Appalachian Spring (1944) continue to serve as exemplars of the frame. They also acted as referents for Maslow's and Gentry's interventions.

Oklahoma, by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II with choreography by de Mille, presents the story of Laurey, a farm girl, locked in a love triangle with her suitors Curly, a cowboy, and Jud, a threatening farmhand. The show's setting in Claremore, an Indian Territory in Oklahoma, does not manifest in any Indigenous presence. Instead, it takes on a rural, cowboy-filled scenescape similar to that of de Mille's *Rodeo*. Although de Mille's choreography is crucial for much of the musical's storytelling, her dream ballet at the end of Act I does not advance the show's plot in a meaningful way. Instead, it provides insights into the show's love triangle and its ambivalences. In the dream ballet, Laurey falls asleep and imagines a scenario that brings embodiment to her subconscious anxieties. The dream begins with Laurey and Curly happily performing a ballet pas de deux. A chorus of women and men comes and prepares them for their wedding. The opening's light and virtuosic ballet technique fades into darkness once Laurey makes her way down a wedding aisle and Jud takes off her veil instead of Curly. Jud's presence begins a dark stretch of Laurey's dream in which she imagines not only the dangerous Jud, but also three scantily-clad women from postcards he had hung in his bedroom prior in the Act. De Mille presents Laurey's anxieties as surrounding her attraction to Jud as well as an identification she felt, and was frightened of, with those women.[75] The three women abandon the dream's previous ballet technique for a can-can movement vocabulary and suggestive skirt swishing. After the women leave, Curly returns and Laurey is caught in the middle of a violent

---

[75] Kara Anne Gardner, *Agnes de Mille: Telling Stories in Broadway Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 31.

fight between her two suitors. Jud kills Curly and carries Laurey offstage in a lift that suggests rape. The danger and seduction in Laurey's subconscious prevail in de Mille's dream ballet. Laurey awakens, but her dream's ambivalences about violence, sexuality, and marriage rupture the musical's Americana frame.

Scholarship on de Mille's dream ballet highlights her intervention in representations of gender and sexuality as presented in the Americana musical. Kara Anne Gardner uses de Mille's notes on the dream ballet and their contrast to those of Rodgers and Hammerstein to argue that it constituted de Mille's "unique contribution to the story."[76] De Mille, according to Gardner, saw Laurey as intrigued by the forbidden nature of Jud and as a character with darker desires than imagined by the musical's creators.[77] The dream ballet, in this way, functioned as a means through which de Mille provided an alternative understanding of a young woman's gender and sexuality while maintaining the thematic and choreographic constraints of the Americana frame. Susan Cook also notes the importance of gender in the dream ballet. She interprets the piece's violence as using "the threat of male sexual violence to insure appropriate gender."[78] Possibilities for Laurey's subversion of gender and sexual norms are limited by the violence imposed by those very conventions. Cook also posits that de Mille's ballet technique elevated the musical form and proved ballet to be accessible to an audience outside of concert dance.[79] These points on gender representation and dance technique within an Americana frame draw attention to the form's possibilities for intervention in issues of representation. Although Laurey's dream ends

---

[76] Ibid., 26.
[77] Ibid., 24.
[78] Susan C. Cook, "Pretty like the Girl: Gender, Race and Oklahoma!," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 19, no. 1 (February 1, 2009): 45.
[79] Ibid.

with the threat of male sexual violence and the musical resumes its gender conventions when she awakes, de Mille's dream ballet demonstrates how ambivalences about gender, sexuality, and marriage can work within the Americana frame's conventions of rural space, heroes, and villains.

Graham, who could trace her Anglo American roots to the Mayflower and was a friend of de Mille, similarly utilized ideas of a woman's ambivalence about marriage in her *Appalachian Spring*. In addition to *Appalachian Spring*'s resonance with de Mille's dream ballet, the piece also furthered Graham's previous imagining of a woman in relation to an open landscape from *Frontier*. *Appalachian Spring* presented a story of a frontier couple in rural Pennsylvania on their wedding day. The Wife and Husbandman dance in community with an older Pioneer Woman, a Preacher, and a chorus of four women Worshippers. They blend Graham technique with hints of square dance and pantomime to convey the place and story of the dance. The lead characters' solos provide glimpses into their internal desires and anxieties. For the Wife, those tensions focus on her mixed feelings about marriage and motherhood. Noguchi's spare set serves those representational tactics by leaving room for audiences to imagine a vast rural landscape. His Shaker-style chair resonates with Copeland's use of the Shaker song "Simple Gifts" throughout his score for the piece. These Shaker accents also place *Appalachian Spring* in conversation with Humphrey's *The Shakers*, furthering its identification with the Americana genre. Despite the Wife's anxiety surrounding the prospect of domesticity, *Appalachian Spring* ends with the Wife and Husbandman gazing into the distance, at peace after their wedding. Whereas de Mille's dream ballet concludes in terror, Graham's work finishes in harmony. Both pieces, though, embody a woman's fears and desires in terms of gender and sexuality.

Scholarship on *Appalachian Spring* points to the dance's ambivalences. Kowal argues that *Appalachian Spring* "enacted in embodied terms the cultural debate surrounding the middle-class white women's postwar role."[80] She supports her argument with evidence from the piece's choreography, its cultural context, and Graham's personal relationship with Erick Hawkins, her at-the-time lover whom she cast as Husbandman across from herself as the Wife. Jacqueline Shea Murphy and Mark Franko similarly recognize *Appalachian Spring* as allowing for a particular kind of embodied interrogation of Americanness while also erasing or diminishing forces that might throw that national construct into question. Shea Murphy examines an "Indian Girl" character that Graham included in earlier written scenarios for *Appalachian Spring*, but did not keep in the final staged version.[81] She argues that Indian Girl's invisibilized presence demonstrates that of Indigenous peoples and spiritualities in modern dance.[82] Franko builds on Kowal's and Shea Murphy's arguments as he attends to the "palimpsestic quality of the dance."[83] Drawing upon Graham's influence from psychoanalyst Carl Jung and the Popular Front, Franko shows how the dance's characters carry traces of pre-existing works. He argues that the "disquiet beneath the wholesome surface of *Appalachian Spring*," fueled by Graham's apprehension about marriage and the characters' porous embodiments, "disclosed the no-longer admissible contestations of the Popular Front that needed to be suppressed in 1944."[84] Taken together, Kowal, Shea Murphy, and Franko demonstrate the ways in which the Americana frame could

[80] Kowal, *How to Do Things with Dance*, 59.
[81] Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing*, 148-168.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Franko, *Martha Graham in Love and War*, 57.
[84] Ibid., 65.

reveal or contest ideas of Americanness while appealing to recognizable depictions of nationality fostered by previous iterations of the frame.

Chapter 2 analyzes how Sophie Maslow and Eve Gentry utilized the Americana frame to re-imagine and re-embody US national identities. Both women's Americana dances resonated with their personal backgrounds as daughters of Eastern European Jewish immigrants within a milieu of Jewish socialism. As Karen Brodkin has explained, Jewish Socialism, was characterized by an anti-capitalist and pro-working-class outlook in Jewish communities and operated as a dominant mode of identification for Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the US from the 1880s through World War II.[85] In fact, Maslow's working-class parents, whom she classified as "Russian-Jewish intelligentsia," were part of those Jewish immigrants who advanced Jewish socialism.[86] Chapter 2 considers Maslow's and Gentry's Americana works as not only leftist interventions in the Americana frame, but also as in line with Jewish socialist ideology. Jews, among other European ethnic groups, assimilated into whiteness during the 1940s. Maslow's and Gentry's re-embodiments of US Americanness took part in and, at times, resisted that wave of assimilation. Both women simultaneously continued and subverted previous Americana dances in ways that mobilized those works' power while also underscoring their problematics. Their choreographies played with the disentanglement of theatricalism and formalist abstraction as a mode of critique. Chapter 2 shows how both women used tactics of

[85] Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998).
[86] Sophie Maslow, Sophie Maslow Interview, 1976, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

disjuncture and satire in ways that harnessed the nostalgia of the Americana frame. In so doing, Maslow and Gentry enacted new definitions of Americanness centered on minoritized bodies.

Abstraction as Americanist Frame

As the 1940s transitioned from wartime mobilization to the Cold War, US modern dance moved from a predominance of theatricalism to a preference for formalist abstraction in a non-linear and incomplete way. Although this time period saw an increased urgency in dance distinct from literal meaning, various iterations of abstraction had been in use by artists since modern dance's earliest days.[87] Often these early abstract dances layered movement that had an illustrative quality with movement that went beyond reference or representation. For example, Wigman practiced "absolute dance," or dance as an autonomous language not reliant on music or costume for referential value.[88] At the same time, she also used movement to evoke kinetic images of, for example, a witch in *Hexetanz (Witch Dance)* (1926).[89] This entangling of movement evocative of specific images (often aided by the dance's title) and movement explorations without clear referent continued as a common practice in modern dance during the first half of the twentieth century. For instance, Graham's *Primitive Mysteries* both evoked a Southwestern Indigenous spiritual ceremony and showcased movement that gestured beyond representation of that event. For Wigman, Graham, and many of their contemporaries, theatrical

---

[87] This early abstraction was most practiced by white artists as artists of color were not afforded the same allowance for abstraction by critics as their white counterparts received.
[88] Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*. Manning explains how Wigman practiced, and was interpreted according to, absolute dance. She also breaks from discourse on Wigman in terms of absolute dance by re-interpreting Wigman's dances in ideological terms.
[89] Ibid.

representation and abstraction could work as part and parcel of one another in service of an overall choreographic work.

Martin used Wigman and Graham as exemplars of modern dance in his *The Modern Dance*. Throughout the book he alluded to an allowance for both representation of real-life referents and abstract exploration even when insisting on the dance form's distance from ballet and its use of plot. Modern dance, for Martin, could be defined as both expressive of an "inner compulsion" and as an "absolute art…completely self-contained, related directly to life, and subject to infinite variety."[90] When developing his theory of kinesthetic sympathy, in which the dancer's intention was transferred to the spectator's perception via the dancer's movement, Martin argued that the process took place whether the movement was representational or abstract.[91] In this way, he allowed for an intermingling of movement to communicate meaning and movement for the sake of movement as part of a whole, absolute modern dance.

Graham's *Lamentation* (1930) modeled this mode of abstraction that both circumvented and allowed for representation. In the solo, she sat on a small bench with her body draped in jersey cloth that covered all but her face, hands, and feet. Stretching, pulling, and writhing movements, as though the cloaked figure was trying to break out of the cloth and bench, accented the piece's name to evoke imagery of grief. *Lamentation*, according to Phillips, stood for a universal embodiment of grief apart from any specific person, place, time, or experience.[92] However, it resonated with depictions of mourning women from Greek mythology as well as that of biblical heroines, both of which provided artistic fodder for later modern dances, including

---

[90] Martin, *The Modern Dance*, 6.
[91] Ibid., 12.
[92] Phillips, *Martha Graham's Cold War*, 46.

Graham's own works based on Greek myths. As Franko argued, the piece's resemblance to the Greek goddess Demeter demonstrated Graham's proto-feminist vision.[93] Graham's dismissal of narrative or specific representation in *Lamentation* rendered it abstract and universal in the sense championed by Martin. Its allusions to various referents, though, enabled spectators to envision whichever mode of grief they desired as they viewed the piece. In tandem with her use of the soloist frame, Graham's abstraction in *Lamentation* rendered it a simultaneously neutral and woman-centered dance. This paradoxical allowance for meaning and obfuscation of it rendered tactics of formalist abstraction—a mode of abstraction with less allowance for overt meaning than Graham's or Wigman's abstract dances—efficacious as the 1940s progressed.

As theatricalism and formalist abstraction disentangled from one another during the 1940s, the postwar avant-garde took advantage of formalism's allowances. As discussed previously in this Introduction, formalist abstraction equipped artists of possibly subversive identities to closet themselves in appeals to movement for the sake of movement. At the same time, a diffusion of female modern dancers into ancillary performance genres enabled formalist abstraction, and white male artists, to achieve prominence in modern dance for the concert stage. Although this particular strand of abstraction moved further from overt meaning than that used by Graham in *Lamentation*, artists of formalist abstraction continued the practice of allowing for a multiplicity of allusions under the guise of universalism.

Opportunities to join the postwar avant-garde's formalist abstraction were not equally available to all modern dancers. African American artists were not afforded the same possibilities of abstraction as their white counterparts. For example, Primus's abstract works

[93] Franko, *Martha Graham in Love and War*, 115.

discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, never achieved the amount of critical acclaim of her dances that clearly represented meanings grounded in the African diaspora. When African American male dancers Donald McKayle and Talley Beatty moved from New Dance Group to independent choreographic careers, their theatrical works similarly won more critical attention than those that leaned towards abstraction or stories detached from overt Afro-diasporic frameworks. Female choreographers of varying races and ethnicities often fell outside of the limits of formalist abstraction for critics. For instance, when Johnston wrote of the aesthetic, she counted female practitioners of abstraction Shearer and Katherine Litz as more emotional and individual than their male counterparts, Cunningham and Nikolais. Johnston argued that the women were "abstract in the intimacy of personal gestures that did not refer beyond the self to socially understood gestures of ritual, work, and emotion."[94] As formalist abstraction continued as a dominant aesthetic, women choreographers gradually received less and less critical attention. For example, Cohen named numerous women in her 1961 "Avant-Garde Choreography" as emblematic of depersonalized, abstract dance. In her 1969 *The Modern Dance: Seven Statements of Belief*, she featured only two women (Anna Sokolow and Pauline Koner) and one African American (McKayle). Formalist abstraction was presented by artists and critics as depersonalized and void of meaning. The aesthetic, though, implied a white male body. Bodies outside of that narrow description could not avoid attributions of meaning or inattention to their formalist work from critics.

Chapter 3 examines Erdman's and Shearer's uses of formalist abstraction. Both women left successful performance careers with The Big Four—Erdman with Graham and Shearer with

[94] Johnston, "The New American Modern Dance," 180.

Humphrey-Weidman—in order to pursue choreographic careers on their own. Erdman and Shearer shared a dedication to dance apart from narrative representation and turned to movement exploration for the basis of their works. They then found subtle, yet profound, meanings in their movement. Erdman paired a complex technique with knowledge of myth and literature from her husband Campbell. Often during her 1940s modern dances, she recognized and made clear proto-feminist evocations in her work. In some ways, her women-centric works continued the proto-feminist visions in the Graham repertoire that she knew so well. Although frequently interpreted by her critics as abstruse, her work resonated with the transition from theatricalism to formalist abstraction and the place of women within that change. Shearer shocked New York modern dance stakeholders when she moved to Chicago at a peak of her success in 1941. They considered this move as evidence of her rebellious nature, an assignation also fueled by her abstract choreography and refusal of norms for white femininity. Critics lauded Shearer for her technical excellence and its accompanying lighting designs by her artistic and life partner Helen Balfour Morrison. However, they also commented upon her dances' abstract and arcane nature. An analysis of several of her key works during the 1940s reveals a discrete attention to issues of loneliness and hiding or revealing one's identity. In Chapter 3, I trace Erdman's and Shearer's works and writings during the 1940s. I particularly focus on their dances that both received significant critical attention and troubled lines between meaningful and meaningless dance. I argue that Erdman and Shearer presented feminist and queer understandings of the relationship between dance, abstraction, and meaning.

***

Women Hidden in Plain Sight of American Modern Dance in the 1940s

Primus, Collins, Maslow, Gentry, Erdman, and Shearer impacted US modern dance during the 1940s by challenging the aesthetic constraints of identity imposed by the art form's conventions and critics. Although these women have been written about as parts of various modern dance narratives, their centrality in the interwoven relationship of modern dance's aesthetic, political, and financial crises during the decade has not been fully documented or theorized. In centering these women who have been hidden in plain sight to varying degrees by modern dance critics and scholars, my dissertation demonstrates intersections between previous narratives of dance history.

Primus and Collins enacted transnational, Afro-diasporic visions of American modern dance. Although Primus has received a significant amount of scholarly attention, those studies have tended to focus on her foundational role in Black dance vis-à-vis her activism and use of Afro-diasporic dance techniques.[95] I draw these narratives into conversation with Primus's acts of situating her work within national and transnational leftism. In attending to the relationship between how she danced and described her work in disparate contexts, I show how she maneuvered through unsteady political, financial, and aesthetic conditions while claiming a central space for Afro-diasporic identities within American modern dance. Existing scholarship on Collins tends to focus on her trailblazing role as the first Black prima ballerina after a stint on Broadway.[96] I shift attention to Collins's modern dances and the ways in which she brought

[95] For examples of this focus on Primus, see Richard C. Green, "(Up)Staging the Primitive: Pearl Primus and 'the Negro Problem' in American Dance," in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, ed. Thomas DeFrantz, Studies in Dance History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 105–42; Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Pearl Primus and the Idea of a Black Radical Tradition," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 17, no. 1 (40) (March 1, 2013): 40–49; Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists and Progressive Politics During World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2013); Kowal, *How to Do Things with Dance*.
[96] For examples of this focus on Collins, see Yaël Tamar Lewin and Janet Collins, *Night's Dancer: The Life of Janet Collins* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2015); Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today*,

ballet, modern dance, and lyric representation together in such a way that enabled her to intervene in issues of racial representation while also balancing in the continuum from theatricalism to formalist abstraction. In doing so, I highlight Collins's ability to move across dance genres while innovating a way of presenting her specifically Creole heritage. My dissertation shows how, when viewed at the intersection of various dance history narratives, Primus and Collins demonstrate the racial implications of the 1940s aesthetic disentanglement of theatricalism and formalist abstraction.

Maslow and Gentry danced Jewish socialist visions of American modern dance. Scholarship on Maslow has focused on her leftist work before and during World War II and then her postwar Jewish-themed dances.[97] I examine Maslow's wartime and postwar work through the lens of not only her ethnicity and political alignment, but also her manipulations of the continuum from theatricalism to formalist abstraction in ways that led her works to be interpreted by critics in ways that served particular political and aesthetic desires. Maslow's implication in the aesthetic disentanglement of theatricalism and formalist abstraction evidences how it functioned in ethnicized, racialized, and gendered ways as specificities of identity in Maslow's work lost uptake in critical reception over the course of the 1940s. The scant amount of literature on Gentry centers her place in the artistic legacy of Wigman and Holm.[98] I shift focus to Gentry's mode of choreographing commentary on existing modern dance or Broadway works in

Second Edition (Hightstown: Princeton Book Company, 1989); Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, *Black Magic; a Pictorial History of the Negro in American Entertainment* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967).

[97] For examples of this focus on Maslow, see Graff, *Stepping Left*; Rebecca Rossen, *Dancing Jewish: Jewish Identity in American Modern and Postmodern Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[98] For examples of this focus on Gentry, see Mary Anne Santos Newhall, "Dancing in Absolute Eden" (Albuquerque, The University of New Mexico, 1998); Mary Anne Santos Newhall, "Uniform Bodies: Mass Movement and Modern Totalitarianism," *Dance Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (ed 2002): 27–50, https://doi.org/10.2307/1478131.

ways that satirized theatricalism while posing staunchly leftist critique. In my view of Gentry as situated between narratives of leftist dance, theatricalism, and modern dance legacies, I show how she combined interventions in national and aesthetic politics. This dissertation's examination of Maslow and Gentry reveals the ethnic and financial considerations modern dance artists weighed as theatricalism and formalist abstraction grew apart from one another.

Erdman and Shearer re-articulated the relationship between femininity and abstract movement exploration. Very little scholarship references Erdman. Considerations of her often do so as a way to situate Cunningham, with whom Erdman collaborated in her early choreographic career.[99] Erdman, indeed, shared a modicum of choreographic tactics with Cunningham. However, her work also demonstrated unique ways of embodying a female identity. In turning my focus to Erdman's interventions in choreographing women-centered possibilities for gender and sexuality, I uncover the intersections between forces of identity neutralization in midcentury abstract modern dance with feminist impulses in the form since its earliest days. Similar to Erdman, Shearer has received little scholarly attention due to her geographic location in Chicago for most of her career as well as limited access to her archival materials until recent years. Recent dance scholarship on Shearer features her dance on film as captured by Balfour Morrison.[100] I attend to Shearer's acts of concealing and revealing her queer identity through her choreography and writing. In this way, I show how her abstract movement explorations enabled

---

[99] For examples of this focus on Erdman, see Morris, *A Game for Dancers*; David Vaughan and Merce Cunningham, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years* (New York, NY: Aperture, 2005).

[100] For examples of this focus on Shearer, see Pamela Krayenbuhl, "Celluloid Dances: How Chicago Women Documented Dance at Midcentury," in *Dancing on the Third Coast*, ed. Lizzie Leopold and Manning, Susan (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, Expected 2024); Lizzie Leopold, "Sybil Shearer: An Archive in Motion," in *Dancing on the Third Coast*, ed. Lizzie Leopold and Manning, Susan (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, Expected 2024).

her the ability to determine when, how, and to what extent she would put her self into her dances. My dissertation's attention to Erdman and Shearer as they moved among narratives of abstract, feminist, and queer modern dance demonstrates ways in which artists enmeshed in the practice of formalist abstraction allowed potentially subversive meanings into their works.

***

Methods and Methodologies

I use the terms "US modern dance" and "American modern dance" in ways that depart from previous modern dance histories. Following the lead of Moreno, I trouble the definition of "American modern dance" as modern dance from the United States.[101] This usage of the term elides nuances in modern dance across the Americas and performs a US-centric approach to modern dance history. "US modern dance" in this dissertation refers to modern dance in the United States. Also following Moreno's example, I use the anachronistic terms "American modern dance" or "American" when I am specifically referring to usages of the terms by artists or critics considered in this dissertation.[102] Similarly, I use the term "Americanness" in an anachronistic way to capture how enactments of national identity were perceived by modern dance artists and critics in the 1940s. This terminology enables me to both acknowledge how my case studies saw their work and unsettle US-centric modern dance histories.

I understand each of this dissertation's choreographers as a theorist and their dances as theories of Americanness. In following this methodological stance, I order my analyses of each woman's dances in the ways that they most often appeared in program order. In this way, the

[101] Moreno, *Dances of José Limón and Erick Hawkins*, 6-7.
[102] Ibid.

continuances, juxtapositions, or meanings made across individual dances surface. The fact that this dissertation's six case studies often used the same program orders for their recitals indicates that they had a distinct rationale for that order and the meanings it would foster. While I honor my case studies' intentions, I also view them as inextricably connected to their critical reception and contemporary contexts. In this way, I exercise what David Román terms "critical generosity," a stance that attends to both the "context and ambition of the performances under discussion."[103] In particular, I follow Elizabeth Son's usage of Román's methodology, in which she focuses on "honoring the aspirations and intentions of my subjects, analyzing the weaknesses and failures of their progressive movement with a critical eye, and working to understand the complexity of their efforts."[104] As a women's history, this dissertation centers female artists' ambitions in a way that challenges dominant modern dance histories' assignations of success or failure as based on a dancer's ability to establish a codified movement vocabulary. Similarly, rather than judge the women of this dissertation's protest or interventionary works as failures because they did not accomplish the kinds of liberation desired, I position them as embodiments of alternative modes of Americanness available for those in their audiences who wished to see that side of the works.

My methods for this dissertation include archival research, oral histories, written performance reconstruction, and choreographic analysis. Data that I gather from archival collections and interviews conducted across the US include oral history transcripts, photographs, film, dancers' diaries and choreographic notes, audition forms, scrapbooks, costumes,

---

[103] David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS*, Unnatural Acts (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), xxvi.

[104] Elizabeth Son, *Embodied Reckonings: "Comfort Women," Performance, and Transpacific Redress* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 22.

performance programs and reviews, historical newspapers, as well as published and unpublished writings. Performance reconstruction is a foundational method I use after initial data collection. I use the evidence collected in archival research and oral histories in conjunction with my embodied experience as a dancer to re-create the dances I examine through writing. These performance reconstructions elucidate how each dance looked and sounded, who was in attendance, and how it was interpreted in relation to the artist's intentions. I then conduct choreographic analysis on my performance reconstructions, assessing the dance's choreography in relation to its aesthetic, political, and social contexts in order to determine meanings generated from the dancing bodies onstage. An interrogation of the many meanings bodies make with sets of movements in particular contexts allows me to understand how the dances I study maintain or depart from established narratives of modern dance history.

Performance reconstruction and choreographic analysis enable my dissertation's methodology of critical historiography in service of a revisionist history. Following the examples of dance scholars John Perpener, Manning, and Anurima Banerji, I consult primary sources alongside previous historical accounts and selected critical theory in order to revise, reperiodize, and recover modern dance history.[105] Additionally, I follow the methodological examples of Rebecca Rossen, Priya Srinivasan, Banerji, and Hannah Kosstrin by using my embodied knowledge as a dancer to aid in my historiographical work.[106] This "embodied scholarship," as

---

[105] John O. Perpener, *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*; Anurima Banerji, *Dancing Odissi: Paratopic Performances of Gender and State* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2019).
[106] Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012); Rossen, *Dancing Jewish.*; Banerji, *Dancing Odissi*; Hannah Kosstrin, "Kinesthetic Seeing: A Model for Practice-in-Research," in *Futures of Dance Studies*, ed. Susan Manning, Janice Ross, and Rebecca Schneider (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), 135–53.

Rossen terms it, enables me to assess what a dance step might have felt like for the dancer, why the choreographer combined movements in a particular way, and which movement vocabularies and aesthetic regimes operate in a performance. I also use this approach when examining other modes of evidence. For example, feeling Shearer's narrow dress for *In a Vacuum* (1941) enables me to understand the necessarily constricted nature of her movement vocabulary. Walking through 92Y's dance stages equips me to know exactly how much stage space Primus's famous jumps could have taken up in *Hard Time Blues* (1943). Or, when conducting an oral history with Nancy Alison, who danced for Erdman and now directs Jean Erdman Dance, our shared moments of embodying Erdman's choreography provide me with an idea of how Erdman passed on her choreographic legacy. My methodology rests on the assertion that dance scholarship can never be disembodied.

My dissertation is premised on theoretical frameworks for the relationship between the female body and nation. I follow political scientist Benedict Anderson's writings on nation as an imagined community and then augment his theory with dance and performance scholars' writings on the intersection of embodiment and nation.[107] I also draw from Anne McClintock's complication of Anderson's theory by attending to a nation's dependence on constructions of gender, group formation through embodied practices, and spectacle. Manning, Diana Taylor, Melissa Blanco Borelli, and Hannah Schwadron demonstrate the crucial role that women's bodies and notions of the feminine serve in national galvanization and contestation. Manning draws attention to the ways in which the female dancing body can lead spectators to question

---

[107] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 2006); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

nationality, nationalism, and gender.[108] Taylor demonstrates how oppressor political classes position the nation and spectators of state crimes as feminine, positioning national dramas on the site of the literal or metaphorical female body.[109] Blanco Borelli argues for the crucial role the mulata body plays in Cuban national formation as a site of objectification, resistance, and self-authorship.[110] Schwadron positions the female body as a site on which negotiations of assimilation and femininity take place.[111] I ground my use of these theories in Susan Leigh Foster's argument that the body can work in interventionary ways both through its material presence and its signification of meaning.[112] Taken together, this scholarship on the intersection of the female body and nation enables me to examine how my dissertation's choreographers' bodies worked with and against their chosen presentational frame to mobilize and reconfigure ideas of Americanness.

***

Decolonizing Dance Canons

As discussed previously in this Introduction, my dissertation revises and decolonizes modern dance canons. While scholars have examined midcentury US modern dance, my project, as a women's critical history, focuses on moments of choreographic transition instead of technical innovation. It moves emphasis away from climactic moments of change and, instead, to

---

[108] Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon*.
[109] Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).
[110] Melissa Blanco Borelli, *She Is Cuba: A Genealogy of the Mulata Body* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
[111] Hannah Schwadron, *The Case of the Sexy Jewess: Dance, Gender, and Jewish Joke-Work in US Pop Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[112] Susan Leigh Foster, "Choreographies of Protest," *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 3 (October 17, 2003): 395–412.

quiet moments of transformation. It shifts attention to the works of female modern dancers who embodied variously racial, ethnic, or sexually minoritized subjectivities at a time when white male choreographers were quickly gaining dominance over their field. Additionally, my dissertation demonstrates how the women who comprise its case studies challenged ideas of nation and nationality in ways that trouble canonical accounts of American modern dance as a cohesive art form. By following the interventions of female modern dancers in the 1940s, this dissertation shows the instability and artificiality of modern dance canons.

Primus, Collins, Maslow, Gentry, Erdman, and Shearer navigated shifting aesthetic and political grounds through their choreography. During a decade that witnessed a national ethnic and racial recategorization as well as shifting gender roles, they embodied proto-feminist visions of Americanness that intervened in previous modes of racial, ethnic, and queer representation. Far from dominant narratives of modern dance's view of the 1940s as a time of stagnation between the theatrical women of the 1930s and the abstract men of the 1950s, the women of this dissertation show how the 1940s witnessed a quiet, yet immense, transformation in modern dance in line with transnational political changes. As the works of Primus, Collins, Maslow, Gentry, Erdman, and Shearer illuminate, US modern dance in the 1940s underwent a financial crisis, aesthetic disentanglement, and diffusion of power through which female artists maneuvered.

Chapter 1:

Dancing Blackness between the Local and the Global: The Solo Recitals of Pearl Primus and Janet Collins

Pearl Primus and Janet Collins danced with and against shifting understandings of Blackness on the modern dance stage during the 1940s. When rising to modern dance fame in the early through mid-1940s, Primus performed in relation to the Cultural Front's and wartime mobilization's inclusion of minoritized subjects in leftist and national efforts, respectively. In response to this momentum for inclusion, Primus engaged in tactics of universalization through which she described her work as simultaneously referencing African American lived experiences and transnational struggles for justice. Collins's modern dance soloist career took place in the immediate postwar years as the United States embraced the Cold War. She benefitted from the greater possibilities for African American self-representation on the concert dance stage paved in part by Primus. However, Collins's fair skin tone and ballet expertise rendered her less constricted by representational conventions than Primus had been. Both Collins and her critics universalized her work by appealing to its signifiers of whiteness. For Collins, this universalization was an attempt to circumvent assignations of "Negro dance" that did not fit her particularly Creole, ballet-infused vision of Afro-diasporic Americanness. Her critics used that universalization as a way to position Collins as a neutral star for modern dance in the new Cold War era, ignoring her culturally specific or protest content. Primus and Collins, I argue, used the solo recital frame to enact a transnational Afro-diasporic vision of Americanness.

In this chapter, I examine how Primus and Collins used the solo and solo recital frame in such a way that intervened in definitions of the Americanness of modern dance. I trace how both

women embodied and contested US modern dance's aesthetic disentanglement of theatricalism and formalist abstraction as it intersected with shifting conventions for racial representation. Primus resonated with her Cultural Front and wartime mobilization context by relating Africa and experiences of African Americans to fights for justice across the globe. Collins emphasized her ballet, French Creole heritage, and research in Jewish culture to perform a capacious understanding of Afro-diasporic identity. Although she was specific about her intentions, critics explained her in generalized ways due to her early Cold War context and use of choreographic tactics that signified whiteness. Primus's attempt to universalize her works was unsuccessful because of her dark skin tone and entrapment in the modern dance versus "Negro dance" debate. Collins, though in ways that distorted her intentions, succeeded in universalizing her work due to her light skin tone and the way in which that along with her ballet technique and Jewish content enabled her to bypass the modern dance/"Negro dance" divide. The cases of Primus and Collins demonstrate how both women maneuvered between references to the local and the global while navigating representations of Blackness on the modern dance stage.

In order to account for the multi-faceted diasporic subjectivities that Primus and Collins configured as part of Americanness of American modern dance, it is necessary to attend to how they ordered their solos. Both artists re-used their recital orders, indicating an intentionality to how they wished their pieces to mesh together. Spectators would have made meanings from a recital not only during each discrete solo, but also in the gaps or bridges from one dance to the next. In the case of Primus, I am able to reconstruct a typical recital in great detail due to the large quantity of evidence available in archival collections. I even reconstruct two of her solos as performed for specific audiences (*African Ceremonial* for the USO and *Hard Time Blues* for

Café Society), an intervention made possible by photographic evidence and Primus's recollections of these audiences' reactions to the pieces. Much less archival material from Collins's recitals exists. I reconstruct her recital in the order she most used. I am able to describe some of her solos in great detail and offer a more general impression of others. Another reason for the differing levels of detail in my reconstructions of Primus's and Collins's recitals is that their critics described them in starkly contrasting ways. Primus was perceived by critics of varying racial backgrounds to be engaged in theatrical tactics for representation. Consequently, they often offered detailed descriptions of her dance steps in order to show how those movements narrated certain experiences. Nearly all of Collins's critics read her as implicitly racialized, yet universal, and in line with formalist abstraction. These critics did not detail each step she took and explain how it connected to her dances' themes. To do so would have forsaken their argument that she could not be taken as representing African American experiences. The transition from theatricalism to formalist abstraction impacted how critics received and analyzed Primus's and Collins's work, especially in terms of representations of Blackness.

I begin this chapter with an explication of shifting understandings of Blackness on the modern dance stage during the 1940s. I then analyze Primus's interventions in the solo recital frame followed by those of Collins. This chapter builds on my discussion of the aesthetic disentanglement of theatricalism and formalist abstraction in the Introduction of this dissertation by showing how that transition impacted, and was impacted by, changing understandings of Blackness on the modern dance stage. It extends my Introduction's analysis of how the solo recital frame functioned as metonymic for the Americanness of American modern dance in the 1940s in attending to issues of racial representation manifested in solo women performers. In

interrogating how Primus and Collins used their solo dancing bodies to archive and envision a transnational, Afro-diasporic mode of Americanness, this chapter fuels my dissertation's later chapters on staging minoritized ethnic and sexual identities in response to national and transnational politics.

Dancing Blackness in the 1940s

From the 1920s through the early 1940s, US modern dance artists and critics defined the art form as distinct from "Negro dance" with the former marked by whiteness and the latter by Blackness even when drawing from the same technical idioms. As Susan Manning has argued, these racial demarcations were not reducible to skin tone, but functioned as conventions for reading bodies in motion.[113] The modern dance/ "Negro dance" divide was not only due to perceptions of racial representation on stage, but also to systems of patronage. Modern dance patronage in the 1930s split between that for leftist dance and that aimed at creating a distinctly American modern dance for the concert stage. "Negro dance" artists, in contrast, cobbled together patronage from both of those streams as well as from African American and commercial performance venues. In the early 1940s, just after those three patronage streams—leftist dance, American modern dance for the concert stage, and "Negro dance"—contracted and merged, Primus threw into question the categories of modern dance and "Negro dance." She used theatricalism to represent Afro-diasporic lived experiences while also displaying an undeniable expertise in dominant modern dance techniques. African American critics focused on her as a representative for her race and white critics asked to which genre of dance she belonged. For

[113] Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xv.

example, Lois Balcom wrote a two-part article on the differences between modern dance and "Negro dance" with Primus as the case study for *Dance Observer* in 1944.[114] She viewed Primus's greatness as a modern dancer linked to that of her as a "Negro dancer." She warned: "if newspaper reviews, publicity writers, and popular audiences force her into the typical predetermined pattern of the 'Negro' dancer instead of letting her work out her salvation as the fine modern dancer which she potentially is, it will be a pity."[115] Balcom viewed adherence to racial content filtered through modern dance technique as crucial for Primus's success. Both African American publications' emphasis on Primus as a champion for racial justice and Balcom's plan for Primus's success tied her to theatrical practices of representation.

By the mid-1940s, the modern dance concert stage held a greater allowance for African American self-representation and artistic authority than in previous decades.[116] Primus's ability to exercise self-representation and challenge the divide between modern dance and "Negro dance" was aided by her Cultural Front context and its leftist imperatives.[117] The Cultural Front, as defined by Michael Denning, encompassed the vast amount of cultural production and labor that was done as part of the Popular Front often by Black migrant and white immigrant artists from working-class urban communities.[118] The New Dance Group, of which Primus was a member and teacher, reflected the Cultural Front as many of its artists hailed from working-class immigrant backgrounds and choreographed in response to the transnational concerns of the

[114] Lois Balcom, "What Chance Has the Negro Dancer?," *Dance Observer* 11, no. 9 (November 1944): 110–11; Lois Balcom, "The Negro Dances Himself," *Dance Observer* 11, no. 10 (December 1944): 122–24.
[115] Balcom, "What Chance Has the Negro Dancer?" 110.
[116] Although Primus certainly hastened this change, it was also due to the many African American dancers before or contemporary to her, especially Edna Guy, Hemsley Winfield, and Katherine Dunham.
[117] Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*, 159.
[118] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London; New York: Verso, 1997), xvi.

Popular Front for leftist and mainstream modern dance spectators. However, as Manning has shown, Cultural Front artists sometimes failed to realize their rhetoric in support of African American self-representation because they believed that white artists also needed to represent African American experiences.[119] In other words, they underscored the importance of African American issues on the concert stage, but understood white bodies as unmarked and able to embody that content. In the late 1930s through mid-1940s, leftist dance and modern dance merged as the Cultural Front's inclusion of ethnically and racially minoritized artists melded into wartime mobilization. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt pushed an agenda of ethnic and racial inclusion in order to gain support for the war effort. This effort accelerated the gains for African American self-representation in modern dance. These contextual forces—the closing years of the Cultural Front and then the rise of wartime mobilization—enabled Primus's representations of Blackness to fit within themes of US national identity and transnational leftism. They also equipped her to attempt to bypass the modern dance versus "Negro dance" debate by universalizing her specifically African American works as transnationally urgent.

As World War II transitioned into the Cold War, conventions for representing Blackness on the modern dance stage shifted again. Manning argues that racial representation on the US modern dance stage solidified during the Cold War.[120] She posits that whiteness—the privileges attached to bodies read as unmarked—universalized modern dance into mythic abstraction, a mode of presentation that ranged from mythic dramas to abstract worlds.[121] In contrast, Blackness—the meanings attached to bodies read as marked by a history of African peoples in

[119] Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*, 60.
[120] Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*.
[121] Ibid., xv, 118.

the Americas—rendered culturally specific dance as a mode in which one body was taken as representative of the collective experiences of Afro-diasporic groups in the Americas.[122] As in the divide between modern dance and "Negro dance," assignations and performances of whiteness or Blackness were not reducible to skin tone, but served as modes for perceiving dancing bodies.[123] A consequence of this change was that white, especially male, choreographers were able to take on the growing trend of formalist abstraction while women and/or artists of color were understood as stuck in theatrical techniques of representation. In this way, the 1940s aesthetic disentanglement of theatricalism and formalist abstraction was part and parcel of changing practices for racial representation and had an acute impact on the racial and gendered composition of modern dance.

While Primus turned her focus to African dance practices that could be included in the burgeoning genre of ethnic dance during the late 1940s, Collins made her debut as a modern dance soloist. Collins departed from Primus in her use of ballet and light skin tone. Neither Collins nor her critics positioned her as wholly representative of an African American collective or as entirely universal and abstract—the dominant conventions for racial representation during the Cold War. She attempted to show herself and her work as both presenting a very particular African American experience and as able to perform more universal (coded as white) content or techniques as well as other culturally specific frameworks. In emphasizing her ballet, the French aspect of her Creole heritage, and her expertise in Jewish culture, Collins positioned herself as beyond the confines of racially-specific understandings of her body and her dances. Both her

[122] Ibid., xv.
[123] Ibid.

African American and white critics rendered her as universal, though implicitly racialized. The case of Primus articulates the changing tenors of racial representation on the modern dance stage during the early through mid-1940s. That of Collins reveals representational conventions during the early Cold War and how she impacted them.

***

“It is a World Problem”: Pearl Primus’s Transnational Solos

Dear Committee,
Please consider me for an audition—I am very anxious to try.
Sincerely Yours,
Pearl E. Primus[124]

If you put up a fence in your mind with “Negro” on it, you are guilty of intellectual segregation. I want my dancing to apply to Jews, Turks, Russians and Indians as well as Negroes. There is no individual problem. It is a world problem, a wide and far-reaching thing.

--Pearl Primus[125]

Pearl Primus’s audition form for the 92nd Street Young Men’s-Young Women’s Hebrew Association’s (92Y) Audition Winners’ Recital and correspondence with 92Y’s Education Director, William Kolodney, stand apart from other dancers’ audition forms and letters that plead for an opportunity. Her cursive writing covers nearly every inch of the application, far beyond the space allowed for dance training, references, and previous performances. A citation of training and performance with Belle Rosette (the stage name of Beryl McBurnie), a Trinidadian dancer and choreographer, while working for the National Youth Administration recalls Primus’s

[124] “92 YM-YWHA Audition Winners’ Recital Audition Form--Pearl Primus,” 1943, Events, Education Department, Box 3, Dance Teachers’ Advisory Committee 1941-42 Folder, 92nd Street Y Archives.
[125] Quoted in Ezra Goodman, “Hard Time Blues,” *Dance Magazine*, April 1946, 32.

Afro-diasporic roots and dance interests as well as activity in New York cultural arenas.[126] Primus was born in Trinidad and resided in New York since she was a toddler. A citation of modern dance classes at Hunter College, her alma mater where she pursued a pre-med track, identifies her early training in modern dance.[127] She clarifies her place among modern dance techniques dominant in New York through a long list of techniques she studied as a scholarship student at New Dance Group. The techniques of Martha Graham (taught by Sophie Maslow and Jane Dudley); Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman (taught by Nona Schurman at New Dance Group and Weidman at Weidman Studio); Hanya Holm (taught by Henrietta Greenhood, later known as Eve Gentry); and ballet (taught by Ann Weiner) are all part of Primus's skillset. She goes on to list several small previous performances with New Dance Group at trade unions, USO canteens, war relief programs, and the National Youth Administration. Primus includes names of other dancers at those performances, placing herself in New York's modern dance scene. Her two references, Dudley and Maslow, listed as "teacher and friend," also work to establish Primus's place in modern dance.[128]

Primus's audition form was indicative of her artistic process from her 1943 recital until her 1949 ethnographic research trip to Africa. She carefully established herself, as well as Afro-diasporic identities and dances, as part of a distinctly American modern dance. She

---

[126] McBurnie returned to Trinidad in 1945 and went on to an influential choreographic career there. Primus's second husband, Percival Borde, was a member of McBurnie's company when she met him.

[127] "92 YM-YWHA Audition Winners' Recital Audition Form--Pearl Primus"; Wendy Perron, personal correspondence with author, May 4, 2022. Primus cited six months of modern dance training under Eugenie Schein at Hunter College in her audition form. Perron explained to me that her mother, Dorothy Perron, started an extracurricular dance club at Hunter College because the school did not have a dance program. Dorothy Perron had previously studied modern dance in the style of Isadora Duncan under Daisy Blau. Primus joined the club and Dorothy Perron, spotting her talent, encouraged her to join New Dance Group. Her training with Schein came after her start in the dance club and introduction to New Dance Group.

[128] "92 YM-YWHA Audition Winners' Recital Audition Form--Pearl Primus."

simultaneously universalized her work and centered it on Afro-diasporic lived experiences. She did so, I argue, by appealing to intersecting and overlapping layers of reference in her work: those of her solo dancing body, US modern dance, African Americans, all US citizens, and transnational leftism. She engaged in this process through her recital ordering, choreographic themes, and discourse surrounding her dances. Some of her critics noted this multi-faceted element of her work, whereas others relegated her only to the genre of "Negro dance." It is crucial to note that not all of these layers were readily apparent in all of Primus's solos. In some cases, she added facets of meaning onto her work when giving interviews. In other cases, critics interpreted Primus's work in ways that either particularized it to African American experiences or universalized it, adding to the competing meanings she had already choreographed. I base my analysis of Primus at the nexus of her intentions, her choreography, her textual discourse on her work, and critics' interpretation of her body and dances. That nexus clarifies how, depending on the particular solo, Primus and her critics minimized or emphasized layers of reference in her work to serve particular political means. Despite the differences in how much or how little she or her critics underscored issues of her solo dancing body and choreography of injustices confronted racially, nationally, or transnationally, Primus's strategy for universalizing her work while maintaining a focus on lived experiences of the Afro-diaspora remained consistent.

Existing scholarship reflects how Primus danced in relation to critics' interpretations of her body and work as well as Blackness more generally on the modern dance stage. Manning accounts for how Primus balanced between leftist dance, modern dance, and "Negro dance" through her choreography, reception, and patronage.[129] Richard Green puts Primus's work in

---

[129] Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance,* 159-177.

relation to white modern dancers of the 1930s who danced to African American spirituals. He argues that Primus was perceived as authentic in contrast to them because of her race.[130] Farah Jasmine Griffin finds that Primus always merged "Afrocentricity" with "social realism and modern dance," including through modes of situating herself within broader struggles for justice during World War II.[131] Rebekah Kowal analyzes Primus during and immediately after her 1949 ethnographic research trip to Africa. She asserts that Primus made use of African dance in ways that foregrounded ideas of performative efficiency and Black civil rights activism.[132] Taken together, Manning, Green, Griffin, and Kowal demonstrate the ways in which Primus navigated critics' attempts to categorize her according to modern dance conventions for race as well as her own shifting commitments to justice for African Americans within transnational leftist causes between 1943 and 1949.

Categorizing Diasporic Dance

Upon successfully passing her audition, Primus was asked by 92Y to perform five solos in the 1943 Audition Winners' Recital, more than any of the other four dancers.[133] Taken together, her solos traced a temporally and spatially non-linear experience of the African diaspora, or what Manning referred to as a "fragmented vision of African American life."[134]

---

[130] Richard C. Green, "(Up)Staging the Primitive: Pearl Primus and 'the Negro Problem' in American Dance," in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, ed. Thomas DeFrantz, Studies in Dance History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 129.

[131] Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Pearl Primus and the Idea of a Black Radical Tradition," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 17, no. 1 (40) (March 1, 2013): 40–49; Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists and Progressive Politics During World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 31.

[132] Rebekah J. Kowal, *How to Do Things with Dance: Performing Change in Postwar America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 117.

[133] "Five Dancers, The Dance Theatre of the YMHA Season 1942-1943 Audition Winners' Recital, Program," 1943, Events, Education Department, Box 3, Dance Teachers' Advisory Committee 1941-42 Folder, 92nd Street Y Archives. The other dancers in the recital included Julia Levien (3 solos), Nona Schurman (4 solos), Iris Marby (3 solos), and Gertrude Prokosch (1 suite of 3 solos).

[134] Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*, 172.

Primus presented *African Ceremonial*, a one-minute-and-forty-five second excursion into Africanist movement and drumming; *A Man has just been Lynched* (later known as *Strange Fruit*), a two-minute-and-thirty-second protest against lynching set to the poem *Strange Fruit* by Jewish communist Abel Meeropol (known under pseudonym Lewis Allan); *Greetings from South America*, a two-minute exploration of Brazilian music and Afro-diasporic dance that Primus never performed again; *Rock! Daniel*, a three-minute blues piece; and *Hard Time Blues*, a two-minute critique of African American sharecroppers' conditions set to the blues of Josh White.[135] Although interspersed with other dancers in the recital, Primus's solos formed an Afro-diasporic map that held Africa, South America, and North America together within her solo dancing body.

Primus took the New York modern dance scene by storm with her 92Y debut. A review in 92Y's member bulletin described her "overwhelming popularity" after detailing her training in Graham, Holm, and Humphrey-Weidman techniques as well as in African dance under the tutelage of a visiting group of West Congo dancers in 1939.[136] *New York Times* critic John Martin similarly declared that she "walked away with the lion's share of the honors."[137] Before providing brief descriptions of each of Primus's dances, he appraised that "it would be hard to think of a Negro dancer in the field who can match her for technical capacity, compositional skill and something to say in terms that are altogether true to herself both racially and as an individual

---

[135] "Five Dancers, The Dance Theatre of the YMHA Season 1942-1943 Audition Winners' Recital, Program"; "Program Order for 92nd Street YM-YWHA Five Dancers Recital," n.d., Box 3, Five Dancers Folder, Events Education Department Collection, 92nd Street Y Archives.
[136] Hilda Koenigsberg, "In the Key of K," *The "Y" Bulletin*, February 26, 1943, 92 Y Bulletin Archive. Neither Primus's audition form nor other press on her mention the West Congo Dancers. They were likely part of the 1939 World's Fair which included an exhibit on the Belgian Congo.
[137] John Martin, "The Dance: Five Artists," *New York Times*, 1943.

artist."[138] Martin sketched a crucial aspect of Primus's incorporation of Afro-diasporic culture as American modern dance. Her "technical capacity" and "individual artist[ry]" connoted her expertise in dominant modern dance forms of that time as well as her attunement to the individual emphasis of early modern dance, a focus that Martin championed.[139] Martin's qualification of her as a "Negro dancer" "true to herself…racially" revealed the barriers and racialized assumptions affixed by dominant critics to African American dancers. These descriptors also showed how Primus used established techniques and choreographic frames to craft her vision of Afro-diasporic content as part and parcel of American modern dance. She was judged in terms of her recognizable modern dance idioms in tandem with her racially marked body and choreographic content. Her technical background rendered her Afro-diasporic choreographic interventions understandable to modern dance critics as well as recognizable on multiple levels to her African American critics. In other words, Primus rendered her solos as part of clearly defined technical and presentational frames that aided critics' recognition of her work.

As Primus added to her choreographic repertoire, she divided her solos into five categories that she explained a 1946 interview in 92Y's member bulletin: "primitive dance," "spirituals," "jazz and blues," "protest" also referred to as "social unrest," and "the Negro working and fighting with other groups."[140] Her primitive dances, she said, showed the "culture and dignity" of Africa.[141] On "folk, spiritual, revivals," she remarked, "the revival minister is one of the most dramatic figures in history," setting up the historical importance of African American

---

[138] Ibid.
[139] For Martin's promotion of individual artistry in modern dance, see John Martin, *The Modern Dance* (Brooklyn: Dance Horizons, 1933).
[140] Matilda Landsman, "Pearl Primus Here in Double Recital," *The "Y" Bulletin*, November 6, 1946.
[141] Landsman, "Pearl Primus Here in Double Recital."

spirituality.[142] "Jazz and blues," she explained as, "the only type of folk dance America can call its own. That's the group the boys in the Army like best," situating African American expressive practices as national and patriotic.[143] Primus, as she repeatedly did throughout her career in the 1940s, defined racism as a national, systemic problem, stating about her protest dances, "to me the Negro problem is not the Negro problem, but the problem of democracy."[144] Her description of the protest dances fed into the relational dynamic of her dances of "the Negro working and fighting with other groups," which she proclaimed as the category of which she was most proud.[145]

When writing a chronicle of her choreography in approximately 1958, Primus added a sixth category: "miscellany (abstract)."[146] Although she did not explicitly state abstraction as one of her categories during the 1940s, the 1958 choreochronicle (along with critical reception from the 1940s) placed some of her works from the decade within that genre. In fact, each of her solos from 1943 through her time of writing the choreochronicle fit into one of these six groupings, evidencing her strategic use of choreographic form. The fact that Primus only explicitly included the "miscellany (abstract)" category in the 1950s reflected the lack of acceptance women and/or artists of color received for their abstract works in the 1940s. By the late 1950s, formalist abstraction was so commonplace that perhaps Primus thought she could finally be understood as in line with that aesthetic. Additionally, her decision to retroactively define some of her 1940s

[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid.
[146] "Choreographic Works of Pearl Primus/Percival Borde," n.d., Pearl Primus Collection, American Dance Festival Archive.

dances as abstract could be attributed to her effort to circumvent state surveillance in the wake of the FBI's scrutiny of her due to her communist ties, as discussed in the epilogue of this chapter.

After her success at the Audition Winners' Recital, Primus expanded her repertoire and performed in numerous solo and joint recitals. These new works fit into her previously established dance categories and articulations of Afro-diasporic expressive practices as enmeshed with American modern dance. She added to her "primitive" category: *Te Moana (The Deep)* (1943), a "study in African rhythms"; *Shouters of Sobo* (1943), a celebration after a priest prepared a feast; *Afro-Haitian Play Dance* (1943); *Yanvaloo* (1943), an "interpretation of a Haitian voodoo ritual"; *Bambare* (1943); *Conga* (1943); *Calypso* (1943); and *Fanga* (1943).[147] Primus choreographed additions for her "folk, Spiritual, Revival" category, including: *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* (1943) to a poem of the same title by Langston Hughes; *Folk Dance/Folk Song* (1943); *Motherless Child* (1944), a dance for those left as widows or fatherless children because of World War II; *Steal Away* (1944), a "tribute to clear thinking leadership of slave revolts who cleverly used religious songs as protective covering for their real messages"; *Lost* (1945), about "a new slave in a new country—confused"; *To One Dead* (1946), a tribute to fallen soldiers accompanied by Primus's original poem; and *Chamber of Tears* (1946), a piece accompanied by Primus's original poem evoking a sense of emptiness and waiting for time to pass at the end of the war.[148] In the "social unrest category," she choreographed *Slave Market* (1944).[149] For

[147] "Ibid.
[148] "Choreographic Works of Pearl Primus/Percival Borde"; Goodman, "Hard Time Blues," 31; "Pearl Primus and Her Company in Soldiers' & Sailors' War Memorial Building, Trenton, NJ," January 23, 1945, Pearl Primus Collection, American Dance Festival Archive; "The Dance Theatre of the YMHA Season 1944-45 Presents Pearl Primus and Dance Company, Program," February 25, 1945, Events, Education Department, Box 4, 92nd Street Y Archives; "The Dance Theatre of the YMHA Season 1945-46 Presents Pearl Primus and Dance Company, Program," February 25, 1945, Events, Education Department, Box 4, 92nd Street Y Archives.
[149] "Choreographic Works of Pearl Primus/Percival Borde."

"Negro working and fighting with other groups," she added: *Our Spring Will Come* (1944), "dedicated to the European and Asiatic underground, the moral of which was that in unity there is strength and freedom" and set to Hughes's poem "The Underground."[150] Primus choreographed for her (later titled) "miscellany (abstract) category: *A Study in Nothing* (1944) and *I Know a Secret* (1945).[151] She made group dances for each category beginning in 1944 when she and her new company performed a run at Broadway's Belasco theatre. Even with the inclusion of group dances, the focus of both Primus's recital ordering and critical reception remained on her solos.

When ordering her solos, Primus wove her dances that spoke most directly to US social and political themes throughout the program. Even when performing with a small company, her solos functioned as anchoring points around which the rest of the program revolved. When speaking to journalists about her work, she emphasized her solos and the ways in which they commented simultaneously upon US and transnational injustices. Critics, in turn, paid significantly more attention to Primus as a solo dancer than to her company. The strong precedent in modern dance for soloists and solo recitals, especially given Primus's debut at 92Y, greatly impacted her directorial choices and, consequently, reception. As Joe Nash, who danced in her company in 1944, stated, Primus "was a supreme soloist in the tradition of American modern dance."[152] He added that her uses of both dominant modes of modern dance and Afro-

[150] "Choreographic Works of Pearl Primus/Percival Borde"; Goodman, "Hard Time Blues," 31; "The Dance Theatre of the YMHA Season 1944-45 Presents Pearl Primus and Dance Company, Program." She also performed *Another Man Done Gone*, a solo about a chain gang choreographed for her by Sophie Maslow as part of this category in 1945.
[151] "Choreographic Works of Pearl Primus/Percival Borde."
[152] Joe Nash, "Joe Nash: Oral History with Peggy Schwartz, December 18, 1995," accessed October 30, 2020, http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums912-s02-i006.

diasporic idioms should be considered as in line with the tradition of US American modern dance because of the form's foundational usage of ethnic dance forms.[153] Nash implied a direct link between Primus and her recitals' mix of modern and Afro-diasporic dance and the performances of women seen as founders of US modern dance. These women, such as Ruth St. Denis and Maud Allen, used aesthetic practices of racialized or ethnicized Others and achieved fame as soloists. In his remarks, Nash echoed a maneuver Primus carried out in both her recitals and discourse surrounding them—to position her as an American modern dancer using expressive practices of Others as artistic fodder. In this way, Primus could be understood as presenting universally applicable themes in similar ways to those in which pioneers of US modern dance were able to adopt aesthetic practices of Others and present them as applicable to their majority white audiences.

Primus innovated in her solos while also adhering to established movement techniques and thematic precedent. This practice evidenced her strategic uses of recognizable techniques and presentational frames in order to center a unique take on African American lived experiences. For example, *Strange Fruit*, perhaps her most written about solo in the 1940s, succeeded the lynching dances of Jewish American leftist dancer Edith Segal's *Southern Holiday* (1933), Anglo American Weidman's *Lynchtown* (1936), and Jewish American modern dance, ballet, and later Broadway artist Jerome Robbins's *Strange Fruit* also set to Meeropol's poem (1939). It preceded Jewish American Eve Gentry's *Magnolia Ladyhood* (1946) and African American Katherine Dunham's *Southland* (1951). Similarly, Primus's *Hard Time Blues* echoed previous leftist dancers' critiques of the oppression of African Americans in the US South, most

[153] Ibid.

directly Anglo American Dudley's *Harmonica Breakdown* (1938). Poetry was widely used by modern dancers as accompaniment as in Primus's *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, *To One Dead,* and *Chamber of Tears*. She also took part in the trend of abstraction as Americanist that gained traction throughout the 1940s with her *A Study in Nothing* and *I Know a Secret*. Choreographically and in discourse surrounding her work, Primus mobilized the established presentational frames of her dances in order to enact a mode of Americanness premised on decentralized, transnational Afro-diasporic politics.

To examine how Primus navigated modern dance conventions for racial representation and solos, I reconstruct her most consistently performed solos. I take *African Ceremonial* from group 1 ("primitive"); *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* and *Motherless Child* from group 2 ("folk, spiritual, revivals"); *Strange Fruit* from group 4 ("social unrest" or "protest"); *Our Spring Will Come* from group 5 ("Negro working and fighting with other groups"); *Study in Nothing* from group 6 ("miscellany, abstract"); and *Hard Time Blues* from group 3 ("jazz and blues") as case studies to demonstrate how she underscored Afro-diasporic themes while appealing to transnational resonances of her work in such a way that universalized it. I go by an order most used by Primus in her recitals, as informed by a survey of numerous recital programs, in order to evoke the journey on which she took her spectators. This enables me to account for the layers of meaning created in between dances by her ordering choices. In the cases of *African Ceremonial* and *Hard Time Blues*, archival evidence provides me with a clear indication of who was in the audience and how they kinesthetically reacted to Primus at a USO tour performance and at the integrated downtown nightclub Café Society, respectively. For the other solos I discuss, I combine descriptions of critics' and spectators' responses from multiple sources, including

African American publications, dominant dance writers, and communist publications. This variety of sources lends insights on how differently positioned critics interpreted Primus's works in relation to her discourse on them.

Primitive: *African Ceremonial* (1943) as Performed for the USO

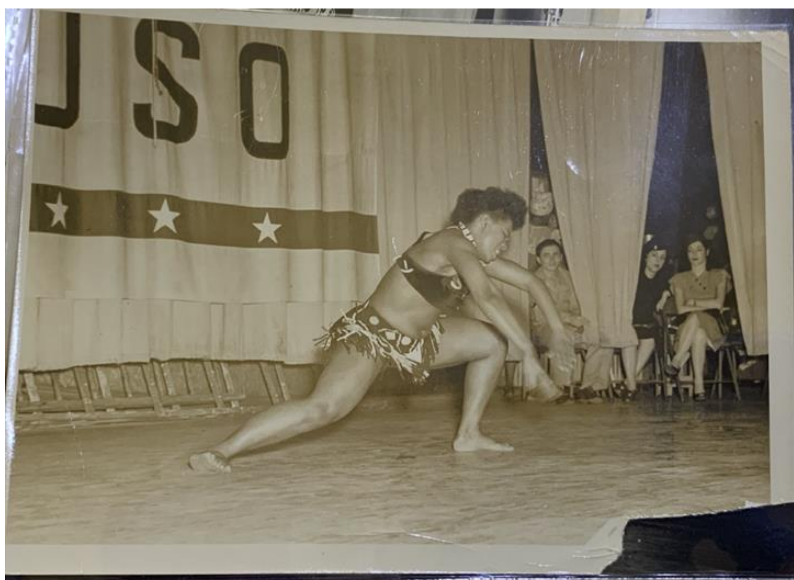


Figure 1: Pearl Primus in *African Ceremonial* for a USO performance, 1940s. Pearl Primus Collection, American Dance Festival Archives.

Primus transforms into a sculpture to begin *African Ceremonial*. When performing the piece at one of her over 1,000 hours of USO performances, she holds the attention of her integrated, though mostly white, audience of service members.[154] She demands all USO events integrate for her performances or she will only dance for their African American service members.[155] Primus channels her strength into "powerful, yet sparse" movements.[156] Her hands and their jingling bangles begin to move in tandem with her pelvis, accompanied by a drum

[154] Vickie Thompson, "Pearl Primus Dancers' Feet Infected Declares Tour's 'Grossly Mishandled': Production Drags; Dancer Plans Suit," *New York Amsterdam News (1943-1961), City Edition*, February 10, 1945.
[155] Richard Dier, "Interview with La Primus: Story of a Great Dancer Who Has Been Graduated from Cafe Society into Big Time," *Afro-American (1893-1988); Baltimore, Md.*, October 21, 1944.
[156] Donald McKayle, *Transcending Boundaries: My Dancing Life* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 22.

composition by Norman Coker and Alphonse Cimber.[157] The choreography follows a clear structure. This choreographic organization is due to the months of research Primus completed on the Belgian Congo ceremony on which she based the dance as well as her process of soliciting feedback from African colleagues at Columbia University.[158] She carefully lowers into a lunge with her arms curved in front of her body. As a photo of one of Primus's USO performances shows, a white service member smiles, impressed with Primus's dance while two white women sit next to him (Figure 1). One woman crosses her arms, unimpressed as though Primus's *African Ceremonial* is out of place at this display of US empire. The woman next to her looks concerned and leans towards her colleague, attempting to make sense of Primus. Her race and histories of abjection in the face of empire loom onstage and over her audience, recalling Soyini D. Madison's argument that solo Black women performers confront assignations of race and abjection.[159] Or, as Frantz Fanon might phrase this moment of racial interpellation, Primus exists in triple—herself, race, and ancestors' histories.[160] An African American woman in African attire who is part of Primus's small company for this show turns her back on the white trio and prepares for her time onstage. Whether excited, concerned, or unimpressed, the audience's eyes are locked on Primus as she centers the Afro-diaspora on a stage of US empire with the goal of

---

[157] McKayle, *Transcending Boundaries*, 22; Peggy Schwartz and Murray Schwartz, *The Dance Claimed Me: A Biography of Pearl Primus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 37-38; "Choreographic Works of Pearl Primus/Percival Borde."

[158] Lois Balcom, "Valerie Bettis and Pearl Primus," *Dance Observer* 11, no. 2 (February 1944): 15–16. Schwartz and Schwartz, *The Dance Claimed Me*, 37-38; Margaret Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance.* (Brooklyn: Knopf, 1949), 270.

[159] D. Soyini Madison, "Foreword," in *Solo/Black/Woman: Scripts, Interviews, and Essays*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), xiii.

[160] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, [1952] 2008).

inspiring the military in their fight against fascism, an objective she describes as in line with African dance.

Primus conducted research in order to choreograph *African Ceremonial* in ways faithful to how a similar dance might have been practiced in Africa. However, she connected African culture to pressing concerns in the US and transnationally. She explained in a 1945 interview:

> I see Africa as the continent of strength; it is a place with ancient and powerful civilizations, civilizations wrecked and destroyed by the slave-seekers. I know an Africa that gave the world the iron on which it moves, an Africa of nations, dynasties, cultures, languages, great migrations, powerful movements, slavery, competition, communism—all that makes life itself. This strength, this past, I try to get into my dances.[161]

Primus describes the Africa on which *African Ceremonial* is based as steeped in a long history of the problems and possibilities most exigent in her contemporary geopolitics. The US Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North resonates with those of Africa. Issues of disparate nations, cultures, and languages within a continent speak to World War II concerns of fascism overtaking Europe. Powerful movements and slavery evoke Primus's activism against Jim Crow in the US South. Her experience in New Dance Group speaks to transnational leftist efforts against the competition of capitalism.[162]

Primus aligns Africa, and her *African Ceremonial*, with good and bad happening across the globe. In this way, she positions African history, her contemporary Africa, and the diverse

---

[161] Earl Conrad, "Pearl Primus Tells Her Faith in Common People," *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967); Chicago, Ill.*, January 6, 1945.
[162] For transnational leftism in the context of midcentury modern dance, see Hannah Kosstrin, *Honest Bodies: Revolutionary Modernism in the Dances of Anna Sokolow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Afro-diaspora as crucial in transnational geopolitics while also clarifying her allegiance to the Cultural Front alignment of New Dance Group. In her recitals, such as for her many USO performances of *African Ceremonial*, she choreographs a particular Afro-diasporic aesthetic informed by research and then universalizes that by placing it in conversation with her US modern dance techniques and surrounding discourse on transnational politics. As in the photo of her USO *African Ceremonial*, she makes space for Blackness within US empire by appealing to a universal importance of the African diaspora.

Folk, Spiritual, Revivals: *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* (1943) and *Motherless Child* (1944)

Figure 2: Pearl Primus in *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, 1940s. Pearl Primus Collection, American Dance Festival Archives.

In *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, Primus uses movement as symbols for specific modes of labor connected to an African diaspora unconfined by time or national borders. She begins the piece in a second position plié with one hand reaching overhead and the other reaching outwards in front of her torso (Figure 2). This pose symbolizes hope. As Primus explains, when Hughes's poem says, 'and I saw its muddy bosom grow up golden in the sunset,' that is the hope. The hope

for today. The hope for tomorrow."[163] She proceeds through the dance by traveling side-to-side, pausing in her hope pose when reaching each side. After a series of small, pulsating contractions, she sprints stage right and is interrupted by deep torso contractions that symbolize "those who brought the big, big stones" in the Nile to build pyramids.[164] After representing that enslaved labor, she strikes her hope pose. Spins across a diagonal and constricted scurries backwards come next and stand for the Mississippi River region and the enslavement and exploitation of the labor of Afro-diasporic peoples there. As she explains, "the Mississippi was a matter of the sadness—of the torture, the loneliness, the fear—of the people of Black ancestry."[165] Kneeling, Primus pulsates her torso in varying speeds and depths, combining the contractions of the Nile with the groundedness of the Mississippi. Erupting out of this symbolization of labor, she crosses the stage in several series of fast turns and sky-high jumps. These turns and jumps take Primus's critique of exploited labor above and across the map her symbolic movements have drawn onstage. The solo's intractable jumps and turns return to the contained hope pose, resonating with Nadine George-Graves's concept of "diasporic spidering" and its process of "gathering of information by going out into the world and coming back to the self."[166] All of Primus's travels to different modes of labor come back to her solo dancing body in a carefully controlled pose. Her hope pose concludes the piece, suggesting hope as a mode of labor in line with the other instances expressed in this solo.

---

[163] *The New Dance Group Gala Historical Concert: Retrospective 1930s - 1970s* (Dancetime Publications, 1993). Kim Y. Bears danced this reconstruction coached by Primus.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Ibid.
[166] Nadine George-Graves, "Diasporic Spidering: Constructing Contemporary Black Identities," in *Black Performance Theory*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 33.

Primus presented a multiplicity of labors to her audience in such a way that was impressive for both its physical and political alacrity. As she recalled spectators' enthusiasm for *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*:

> First let me say that my "applause" was tremendous from the beginning. I mean, this was part of the phenomenon they called Pearl Primus. So much so that many people, especially the older ones, thought that this was a "divinely inspired" work—I mean there was no other excuse they could find for someone who had the ability to get across the things I was saying.[167]

Her accompaniment by Hughes's poem, speaking of ancient rivers and his soul as akin to deep rivers, facilitated her spectators' interpretation of the piece as divine.[168] She enacted intersecting layers of reference to lived experiences in the piece. By combining stage crossings with Hughes's aural journey across time and space, Primus situated her dance as able to take on transnational and transtemporal tenors. That corresponded with how she positioned the rest of her "folk, spiritual, revivals" category.

When explaining her *Motherless Child* solo accompanied by a sung spiritual of the same title, Primus defined it in the context of World War II. She explained it as for "all women left husbandless, all children left parentless, all husbands without homes."[169] In this way, it could be interpreted as not particular to African Americans or even US citizens in general, but open to those impacted by the war worldwide. In fact, she went on to add that *Motherless Child* "was

---

[167] Pearl Primus, Dancer: Pearl Primus, interview by Elisa Wrenn, 1982, Pearl Primus Collection, American Dance Festival Archive.
[168] Primus either had a narrator read the poem offstage or danced to a recording, depending on the particular performance.
[169] Goodman, "Hard Time Blues," 31.

wrongly labelled by some critics as 'Negro.' It was not meant to be such in the narrow sense."[170] Scant reception of *Motherless Child* suggests that critics placed it as an African American spiritual. That interpretation neglected the transnational significance of not only the solo, but also of all of the "folk, spiritual, revivals" category that Primus articulated in discourse surrounding her dances. After correcting misinterpretations of *Motherless Child*, Primus elaborated, "my modern spiritual numbers…I treat as *American* folk songs, not just Negro songs. It is interesting to me that America has accepted these songs as folk music and not accepted the people who brought them to life."[171] Here, she conveyed how she choreographically underscored Afro-diasporic peoples and cultures in her work while positioning that work *as* American. In both *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* as well as this interview Primus gave on *Motherless Child* and her "folk, spirituals, revivals" category, she universalized her focus on African American experiences and injustices to those beyond national or temporal constraints. The interview went on to instruct:

> Miss Primus emphasizes the fact that her dancing should not be specifically labelled as 'Negro.' "The first responsibility of everyone," she says, "is to be human. That is the underlying trait of all peoples, and I hope of my dancing. If you put up a fence in your mind with 'Negro' on it, you are guilty of intellectual segregation. I want my dancing to apply to Jews, Turks, Russians and Indians as well as to Negroes. There is no individual problem. It is a world problem, a wide and far-reaching thing."[172]

Primus's maneuvering of her spirituals in this way stemmed from her alignment with transnational leftist or communist causes as well as her effort to carve space for herself and Afro-

---

[170] Ibid.
[171] Ibid (emphasis in original).
[172] Ibid, 30-31.

diasporic dancers within American modern dance. Her assertion demonstrated how modes of universalization functioned in both modern dance (with a universality marked by whiteness) and in leftist culture (with a universality premised on a transnational coalition bounded by political orientation). By defining her spirituals as referring to both African American experiences and universal concerns, she aligned them with modern dance's proclivity for works that supposedly tapped into universal emotions.[173] She also built on the precedent of white modern dancers' spirituals in which they made embodied reference to subjects of color in a practice Manning termed as "metaphorical minstrelsy."[174] Although Primus did not attempt to dance as someone of another race or nationality in her spirituals, she universalized the dances in ways that allowed for them to be construed as about the experiences of many across racial and national lines.

Primus was keenly aware of metaphorical minstrelsy and practices of universalizing African American spirituals due to her modern dance training and her experiences of Jewish American modern dancer Helen Tamiris, who popularized spirituals and metaphorical minstrelsy on the concert dance stage.[175] When reflecting on the question of how to define Black dance in a 1989 interview, she cited Tamiris's spirituals (as well as Janet Collins's ballet) as a complicating factor in the question. Her consideration of Tamiris when defining Black dance demonstrated how she considered the multiplicity of ways in which African American spirituals could be deployed in universalizing ways. Similar to how Primus began *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* with movements symbolizing specific instances of exploited labor and then flew above them in leaping circles, she based her spirituals on specific Afro-diasporic lived experiences and then

[173] For modern dance as able to reach universal emotions, see Martin, *The Modern Dance*.
[174] Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*, 10.
[175] Ibid., 1.

moved beyond those to present the dances as universally applicable and in line with US modern dance.

Social Unrest and Protest: *Strange Fruit* (1943)

Figure 3: Pearl Primus dancing. Pearl Primus Collection, American Dance Festival Archives. Although the performance in this photo contact sheet is unidentified, the movements in these photos match those in danced reconstructions of *Strange Fruit*.

Primus begins *Strange Fruit*, a solo in her "social unrest" category and her favorite dance, by walking on an upstage diagonal in silence.[176] She dances as a white female lynch mob member.[177] Spectators would not know her character, though, unless they happened to have read reports on the piece or interviews with Primus. She abruptly stops, turns around, and strikes an

---

[176] Michael Carter, "Pearl Primus Dances Out Social Problems: Entertainer Attempts to Contribute to Interracial Understanding; Tours South to Study Actions in Church," *Afro-American (1893-1988); Baltimore, Md.*, July 22, 1944.

[177] Some accounts of *Strange Fruit* describe her character as a man. Despite conflicting accounts, I understand the character as a woman because of the volume of previously published descriptions of Primus as portraying a white woman as well as due to Eve Gentry's 1946 *Magnolia Ladyhood*, which drew inspiration from *Strange Fruit* and scathingly mimicked Southern white womanhood.

intense pose with her elbows pulled back, hands locked in fists, and chest cutting through space as it is thrust forward.[178] This pose dissipates as she turns and falls to the floor, a repeating motif in the dance. She reaches up in desperation as she gazes past the downstage left corner of the stage, the space of the invisible tree and lynched body, only to collapse back to the ground with a sharp exhale. She is, as her contemporary dancer Donald McKayle recalls, "a woman consumed with horror, recoiling from a lynching she had just witnessed."[179] A serpentine arm movement, much like a gnarled branch of a tree, brings her to stand as the narrator of the poem begins his recitation. Primus runs toward the tree. When she gets close, however, her body appears as though it is violently acted upon by an invisible force. Her torso caves into a deep contraction she repeats throughout the piece whenever close to the tree (first photo in Figure 3). The solo proceeds on a diagonal as Primus either tentatively walks, runs, or spins towards the invisible tree and then scurries away in fear and horror. She interrupts her diagonal by intermittently falling to the floor or sharply flicking out her limbs as though struggling to remain in her body. The dance climaxes as Primus runs in circles while her body increasingly shows its fatigue. After falling to the floor, she stands a final time and walks toward the tree in a way that both approaches and circumvents it. For each step forward with her right foot, she takes one step to the side with her left foot. Confronting and combatting racial injustice require a circuitous route.

Primus's discourse on *Strange Fruit* contrasted with that of her critics. Regardless of whether critics knew of the character she intended to portray, they consistently interpreted the dance as a display of, and protest against, the horrors of lynching. Martin wrote that the solo "has

---

[178] *Free to Dance Episode 2: "Steps of the Gods" (Part 1)*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcN0G7xItwo. Dawn Maris Watson dances this reconstruction of *Strange Fruit*.
[179] McKayle, *Transcending Boundaries*, 23.

passion and overtones of terror in it, and calls forth some extraordinary movement."[180] Some writers interpreted Primus as dancing as an African American protagonist and, therefore, using that extraordinary movement to evoke an empathetic agony. Louis Lomax for the *Afro-American* explained the piece as a demonstration of "the horrors of a lynching" in such a way that "those assembled to see [her] must surely have felt through watching her dance the tragedy of a lynching that they could not feel through newspaper accounts."[181] In her *Dance Observer* article about whether Primus ought to be considered as a modern dancer or a "Negro dancer," Balcom also assumed Primus to be dancing as an African American character. After describing the dance's lack of discipline, which Balcom defined as "not notably a Negro characteristic," she referred to Primus's challenge as to "discipline herself in the use of her medium that through it she expresses precisely the shade and quality of undisciplined emotion which she wishes her Negro protagonist to portray."[182] In her larger debate of how to define Primus, Balcom determined there to be an incompatibility between what she saw as essential qualities to modern dance (coded as white) and Blackness. In this way, Balcom pushed *Strange Fruit* to be more applicable to African American lived experiences than to universal fights against injustice.

Writers who knew of Primus's intended character often used it as evidence of an interracial understanding and sympathy on the part of Primus. For example, Margaret Lloyd of the *Christian Science Monitor* and *Borzoi Book of Modern Dance* found "it…noteworthy that here [Primus] identifies herself with a white person, and has the acumen to see, even in a lynch mob, the possibility of remorse."[183] In an article for the *Afro-American*, Michael Carter included

[180] Martin, "The Dance: Five Artists."
[181] Louis Lomax, "7,000 See Pearl Primus in Dance," *Afro-American (1893-1988); Baltimore, Md.*, June 17, 1944.
[182] Balcom, "The Negro Dances Himself," 123.
[183] Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*, 271.

a detailed description by Primus of her *Strange Fruit* character.[184] He then situated *Strange Fruit* as part of her overall work to increase interracial understanding and fight social ills. Taken together, critics of varying social locations and publications presented *Strange Fruit* as an exposition of the atrocity of lynching with an emphasis on some combination of evoking empathy among her African American spectators or increasing interracial understanding within the US.

Primus's accounts of *Strange Fruit*, indeed, clarified her intent to illuminate the horrors of lynching and to fight against systemic racial injustices. However, she described the piece as less sensational than did her critics. She also connected it to national and transnational coalitional struggles against oppression. When speaking with Carter for his article, she referred to the dance as a "slow process" for contributing to "interracial understanding" as "only when this is achieved can America enjoy a real democracy to the benefit of all its people."[185] A writer for *New York Amsterdam News* explained, "the intensity of her feelings about discrimination, fascism (which she insists still exist in America today) can be noted in her dances of protest."[186] In both of these examples, Primus presented *Strange Fruit* as containing intersecting layers of reference for African American concerns in the US, problems of US society in general, and issues of democracy and fascism that carried transnational exigence in the context of World War II.

This maneuver of layered references could be considered in relation to Primus's alignment with the Double Victory (Double V) campaign.[187] The Double V Campaign, started in

---

[184] Carter, "Pearl Primus Dances Out Social Problems."
[185] Ibid.
[186] Thompson, "Pearl Primus Dancers' Feet Infected Declares Tour's 'Grossly Mishandled.'"
[187] Griffin, "Pearl Primus and the Idea of a Black Radical Tradition." Griffin also discusses Primus in relation to the Double V Campaign.

the African American newspaper *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1942, linked the country's fight against fascism abroad with an internal fight for democracy and racial justice.[188] This promoted (at times fruitful and at other times fraught) solidarities between Jewish and African Americans as well as with all those impacted by fascism worldwide. Additionally, it enabled issues of racism to be positioned as issues of democracy and anti-fascism, as Primus did in her discourse surrounding *Strange Fruit*. Primus used Double V rhetoric across numerous instances.[189] In the case of *Strange Fruit*, though, this rhetoric increased the urgency of fights against lynching by highlighting their transnational importance. It is crucial to note that although this universalizing tactic, as well as Primus's and some critics' mentions of interracial understanding, could be read as encouraging sympathy for her white woman character, that mode of sympathy was not part of the dance. There was choreographically no resolution for the character. As one *Afro American* writer succinctly described *Strange Fruit*: "Primus mocks the South with her interpretive dance."[190] In Primus's articulation of protest against oppressions faced by African Americans, interracial solidarities could be formed, but no guilty party was granted sympathy.

Negro Working and Fighting with Others: *Our Spring Will Come* (1944)

Our Spring Will Come, part of Primus's "Negro working and fighting with others" category, articulated an interracial, transnational solidarity among marginalized groups. Accompanied by Hughes's poem "The Underground" published in the communist periodical

---

[188] Patrick S. Washburn, "The Pittsburgh *Courier*'s Double V Campaign in 1942," *American Journalism* 3, no. 2 (April 1986): 73–86.
[189] In addition to advancing the Double V Campaign through discourse surrounding her work, Primus choreographed for Edmund B. Hennefeld's play *G-11* (1948) about the aftermath of Nazi bacteriological warfare. Scant extant descriptions of the play's dancing are almost identical to descriptions of Primus's *Strange Fruit*.
[190] E. Rea, "Encores and Echoes: College Graduates Debut as Piano Team Canada Lee Admits Coming Altar Trek," *Afro-American (1893-1988); Baltimore, Md.*, May 20, 1944.

New Masses in 1943 and John Cage's score for the piece entitled *Our Spring Will Come*, Primus embodied a message of combatting a myriad of injustices while maintaining a steadfast hope.[191] Although few material traces of the solo remain, critics' accounts demonstrate her intention for the piece. Balcom referred to the "burdened struggle of *Our Spring Will Come*, a piece over burdened by the insistence of its 'message,' by the way, Pearl Primus dances her head off."[192] In another review, she explained that "with the help…of spoken accompaniments, there is not the slightest danger that the least initiated will miss [the dance's] point."[193] Primus's movement clearly resonated with the poem's vivid words of torture and murder at the hand of "Nazis, fascists, headsmen" across the globe.[194] Perhaps the intensity required by these words led Balcom to write that Primus "dances her head off."[195] Hughes's poem linked wrongful deaths and uprisings against fascism across disparate nations. In using this poem and matching it with her signature powerful jumps and determined movement, Primus used the piece to set African Americans' experiences within a network of transnational leftism.

The success of this dance's purpose was evidenced not only by Balcom's ambivalent responses, but also by Earl Conrad for the *Afro American*. He concluded his 1945 article on Primus by stating:

> We found out during the evening some of the things she was for: for the Political Action committee, for a great, strong Soviet Union in the post-war period; for jobs for everybody

---

[191] Langston Hughes, "The Underground," *New Masses* 48, no. 13 (September 26, 1943): 14; *John Cage, Our Spring Will Come (1943)*, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DoItL4K0Q7g. The full text of "The Underground" can be found in *New Masses*.
[192] Balcom, "Valerie Bettis and Pearl Primus."
[193] Balcom, "What Chance Has the Negro Dancer?" 110-111.
[194] Hughes, "The Underground."
[195] Balcom, "Valerie Bettis and Pearl Primus."

here at home; for an end to Jim Crow; for a Fair Employment Practice Act nationally; for the integration of Negro and white in more and more phases of Negro life; for the arts; for the dance; for the people; for America.

"Tell them," she said, "our spring will come."[196]

Conrad interwove African American, general US, and transnational concerns within the context of *Our Spring Will Come*. Characteristic of nearly all of Primus's repertoire pre-1949, these three layers of reference were intertwined and could be emphasized or minimized depending on the context. *Our Spring Will Come* demonstrated the most transnational approach of Primus's pre-1949 solos. It complicated her contemporary white dance critics' attempts to define her as either "Negro dance" or "modern dance."

Miscellany (Abstract): *Study in Nothing* (1944)

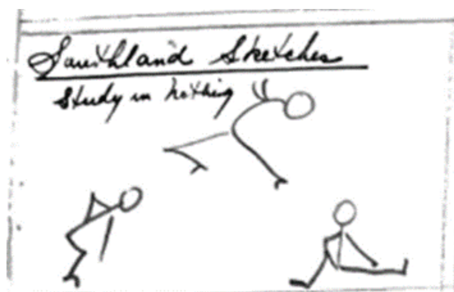


Figure 4: Sketch of *Study in Nothing* (revised version for group) by Pearl Primus. Pearl Primus Collection, American Dance Festival Archives.

As Primus's fame for her social commentary dances grew during the war years, she became caught in expectations that all her dances carry those kinds of meanings. African American publications consistently praised Primus as a champion for her race, "dancing as one might use a motion picture or a book to explain and interpret social problems."[197] White dance

[196] Conrad, "Pearl Primus Tells Her Faith In Common People."
[197] Carter, "Pearl Primus Dances Out Social Problems."

critics heightened the stakes of those expectations as they continually negotiated whether Primus ought to be defined as a "Negro dancer" confined to Afro-diasporic themes or a "modern dancer" capable of presenting abstract or obstruse movement. All critics needed to grapple with Primus's dark skin tone, Afro-diasporic dance forms and themes, expertise in dominant modern dance idioms, and transnational leftism. As Balcom indicated in her 1944 two-part article on whether Primus should be considered a modern dancer or a "Negro dancer," the dominant expectation for Blackness on the modern dance stage at that time was for the dancer to explicitly represent Afro-diasporic thematic content through theatrical practices.[198] This role for Blackness in modern dance allowed for African American artists to exercise greater self-representation than in previous decades. However, it refused them access to formalist abstraction, which was quickly growing in popularity for New York modern dancers.

The foreclosure of abstraction as a category for Primus manifested in the extremely limited material traces of her "miscellany (abstract)" category, including *Study in Nothing*. Critics rarely mentioned the solo even though Primus frequently performed it. African American critics occasionally mentioned the piece as part of Primus's recitals, but did not offer reviews or interpretations of it. Even though tendencies towards abstraction in US modern dance increased throughout the 1940s, and Primus performed *Study in Nothing* in the same venues her New Dance Group colleague Anglo American Jean Erdman performed her 1940s abstract solos to great acclaim, white critics refused to engage with Primus's ambiguous dance. Balcom viewed it as a disappointing counterpoint to Primus's social commentary dances, writing "what she has to

---

[198] Balcom, "What Chance Has the Negro Dancer?"; Balcom, "The Negro Dances Himself."

say, is not expressed through…*Studies* [sic] *in Nothing*."[199] Lloyd allowed that Primus "can toss off a humorous number like *Study in Nothing*, a solo dialogue with a piano," but then immediately qualified that with the assertion that "there is no good in trying to separate her from race, and no reason for it."[200] For Balcom and Lloyd, *Study in Nothing* might have been a good dance, but it did not matter nearly as much as her social commentary works.

The fact that Primus continued to perform the piece despite its lack of success, which was uncharacteristic of her, attested to the importance she saw in it. She even revised it by adding more dancers and placing it among her *Southland Sketches* series of dances based on the US South (Figure 4), but still to no success. The case of *Study in Nothing* revealed the ways in which dance critics determined an incommensurability between Blackness and abstraction during the war years. African American modern dancers could participate in modern dance so long as they adhered to racially specific content filtered through recognizable modern dance idioms. Primus elided "miscellany (abstract)" in her explanation of her dance categories in 1944 (leaving *Study in Nothing* apparently uncategorized).[201] She understood the mechanics of racial representation. She could universalize her work by appealing to transnational politics. However, a use of abstraction, which coded for modern dance critics as white, went without note. By the time Primus composed her choreochronicle in the late 1950s and added "miscellany (abstract)" as a category,[202] perhaps she thought there had been enough precedent for her *Study in Nothing* to achieve recognition as abstract given the sharp rise of formalist abstraction and of Collins, who was often interpreted as abstract. Primus challenged the limits of racial representation in modern

---

[199] Balcom, "The Negro Dances Himself," 123.
[200] Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*, 266.
[201] Landsman, "Pearl Primus Here in Double Recital."
[202] "Choreographic Works of Pearl Primus/Percival Borde."

dance with *Study in Nothing*. She made room throughout the 1940s for Afro-diasporic bodies and dances on the concert dance stage, but only when performing theatricalism.

Jazz and Blues: *Hard Time Blues* (1943) as performed for Café Society

Figure 5 (left): Pearl Primus in *Hard Time Blues* at Café Society, 1940s. Photographer: Rosalie Gwathmey. Ivan Black Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, © 2022 Estate of Rosalie Gwathmey / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Figures 6-10 (right): Portraits of Pearl Primus, 1940s. Pearl Primus Collection, American Dance Festival Archives.

In addition to concert dance, Broadway, and USO stages, Primus took her solos to Café Society, a downtown New York integrated nightclub favored by leftist society. As she recalled, "at the Café Society [they would] put my records on and I'd do my dances…one was a protest against the system that creates sharecropping. Now can you imagine that in a night club? *Hard Time Blues* it was called."[203] She begins *Hard Time Blues* by sprinting onstage and then abruptly halting and contracting her torso as White's song "Hard Time Blues" plays. Café Society

[203] Primus, Dancer: Pearl Primus.

"stop[s] dead to pay attention to Pearl Primus," recalls Nash.[204] As she leaps across a series of diagonals, she takes her solo into the air and towards the audience, implicating them in the sharecroppers' plight. She only moves away from the audience so she can begin another soaring diagonal towards them. Her flying "projection of defiance or desperation" is most consistently noted in reviews.[205] From the back corner of the stage, she lunges low to the ground only to take off running across the floor. She erupts into the air with her legs still running. The air becomes her earth as she hovers between the ground and sky. Or, as Lloyd describes this moment, "[it] is phenomenal for its excursions into space and stopovers on top of it."[206] When Primus returns to the earth, she disorients the straight diagonal line in which she had been traveling by spiraling into a pirouette that chisels into the air. She launches out of the turn into a series of quick jumps.

Primus finishes the piece by methodically walking towards her audience (Figure 5). Her interracial audience members at Café Society, perhaps contemplating their implication in systemic racial oppression or maybe applauding themselves for watching Primus and distancing themselves from the problem, lean forward and into her direction. Nash describes this moment as "she approaches the audience beating her thigh as if to say 'Give me. Give me food. Give me shelter. Give me something. And that was a very impressive moment.'"[207] Primus does not ask, but demands room for African American sharecroppers in US economic systems as well as the transnational coalitions for justice called forth in her solos.

Hard Time Blues featured infectious and radiating energy. Hughes described the solo's dynamic choreography and social mission: "she got low down on the ground, walked, turned,

---

[204] Nash, "Joe Nash: Oral History with Peggy Schwartz, December 18, 1995."
[205] Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*, 271-272.
[206] Ibid., 271.
[207] Nash, "Joe Nash: Oral History with Peggy Schwartz, December 18, 1995."

twisted, then jumped way up in the air. The way she jumped was the same as a shout in church. She did not like the Jim Crow train, so she leaped way up into the air."[208] Ending her recitals with *Hard Time Blues* enabled Primus to position African American sharecroppers as a concluding, immediate site on which to land her recital's travels through local and global concerns. Her stretched limbs, countless leaps towards the audience, and final demand all implicated her spectators in sharecroppers' struggles. As Primus stated, the dance was a "protest against the system that creates sharecropping," including Café Society's crowd.[209] In concluding her recital's journey with this solo, she gave her audience a clear directive to take action against the immediate concerns of African Americans in the South and then extend their work outwards into general US issues and then to the network of transnational leftism conveyed in her dances and discourse surrounding them.

Hard Time Blues fits into an existing solo presentational frame, though with an addition of Primus's self-aware interventions. Her New Dance Group colleague Dudley premiered *Harmonica Breakdown* in 1938, a piece which Primus would have seen numerous times in New Dance Group performances, including some in which she performed herself.[210] In *Harmonica Breakdown* Dudley engaged in metaphorical minstrelsy and danced as a downtrodden African American male sharecropper in order to protest the exploitative labor practices endured by Southern African Americans. In *Hard Time Blues*, Primus, like Dudley, used a popular blues song. In sharp contrast to Dudley's character who remained grounded as though weighted by a

---

[208] Langston Hughes, "Here to Yonder," *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967); Chicago, Ill.*, June 22, 1946, sec. Editorial Page.
[209] Primus, Dancer: Pearl Primus.
[210] For the relationship between Dudley's *Harmonica Breakdown* and Primus's *Hard Time Blues*, see Jessica Friedman, "Dancing Sharecroppers: Jane Dudley's and Pearl Primus's Border Crossing Blues," in *In Border Crossings: Exile and American Dance, 1900 - 1955*, ed. Ninotchka Bennahum and Bruce Robertson (New York: New York Public Library Press, 2024).

ton of bricks, Primus's sharecropper exploded into the air. Primus's character traveled beyond her present condition in order to demand better from her audience. Lloyd, likely comparing *Hard Time Blues* to *Harmonica Breakdown*, perceived a mismatch between Primus's airborne dance and its subject matter. She asserted, "for me it was exultant with mastery over the law of gravitation, and the poor sharecroppers were forgotten."[211] Primus corrected her, explaining, "going up in the air does not always express joy…it can mean sorrow, anger, anything; it all depends on the shape the body takes in the air."[212] Primus's sharecropper was invigorated and engaged in combat against injustice, whereas Dudley's could not get off the ground. Writing for the *Chicago Defender*, Conrad associated Primus's particular take on labor in *Hard Time Blues* with her lived experiences that separated her from many of her white colleagues. He explained, Primus "knew the meaning of 'Hard Time Blues.' She's worked, made her own way, belonged to unions. She's had manual labor and her white collar work, her period on NYA."[213] Primus's *Hard Time Blues* contained a self-aware, if not satirical, commentary on depictions of oppressed African American subjects in modern dance, including Dudley's *Harmonica Breakdown* or Tamiris's spirituals such as *How Long, Brethern?* in which white dancers performed to the accompaniment of Black singers.

In a portrait series from the 1940s, Primus dressed as a sharecropper complete with a straw sunhat, bag for picking cotton, and a fence on which to lean (Figures 6-10). In line with her *Hard Time Blues* character, and in sharp contrast to Dudley or Tamiris, Primus never posed as downtrodden. Whether showcasing a mischievous smile as though she knew something her

---

[211] Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*, 271.
[212] Ibid., 271-272.
[213] Conrad, "Pearl Primus Tells Her Faith in Common People."

viewer did not, an eyeroll like she was facing something absurd for an umpteenth time, or a look of annoyed impatience, Primus's sharecropper critiqued both conditions of sharecroppers and common representations of them. These portraits and *Hard Time Blues* commented upon one of the central layers of reference in Primus's 1940s repertoire—that of US modern dance. Harkening back to her 92Y audition form, Primus knew the mechanisms for success in the field and how to carve space for herself and Afro-diasporic identities, dance techniques, and themes into it. She adopted a multi-faceted approach to claiming expertise in both modern dance and Afro-diasporic identities in order to achieve success in ways that fulfilled and moved beyond the representational conventions demanded by dominant dance critics. In all of these approaches, she maintained her intersecting layers of reference to African American, US, and transnational leftist concerns.

A Transnational, Afro-Diasporic American Modern Dancer

Whether in her 92Y audition form, choreography, or discourse on her work, Primus positioned herself as a distinctly American modern dance soloist creating work that participated in transnational leftist struggles against exploitative labor conditions, racism, and fascism by representing African American experiences. She layered references in her work and surrounding discourse that were available for spectators who wanted to see them. These references started at Primus's solo dancing body as she centralized herself through virtuosic dancing. The references then extended to the following layers: US modern dance; distinct and overlapping concerns of African Americans from the US North and South; general US issues; and transnational leftist coalitions. She harnessed her Cultural Front context in such a way that connected her local African American content to fights against injustice throughout the globe. Primus's attempts to

universalize her works by positioning them as transnationally exigent enabled her to try to circumvent the modern dance/ "Negro dance" divide.

Primus built upon precedents for the solo recital frame as a key mode through which to prove herself as an American modern dancer. Even when she added a small company, her solos anchored her recitals and were the most written about aspects of the shows. She also used precedent for specific solo presentational frames, such as for spirituals or sharecropping, in order to comment not only upon the political or social issues at hand, but also upon previous (often white) dancers' representations of them. In discourse surrounding her work, Primus constantly situated herself as an American modern dance star and her works as rooted in African American experiences while also speaking to transnational concerns. This tactic enabled her to maneuver through white dance critics' debates on whether to define her as "Negro dance" or "modern dance." She pointed to the ways in which the two categories were intertwined while also universalizing her culturally specific works to broader audiences in ways resonant with modern dance's proclivity for universalization. In the late 1940s, Primus's ethnographic trip to Africa and the beginning of the Cold War brought about drastic changes to both how she defined herself and how US modern dance included Blackness. However, Primus's work in the early through mid-1940s paved the way for later African American dancers, such as Janet Collins, to mobilize the solo recital frame as a mode through which to intervene in American modern dance and politics.

***

"I'm Star Material": Janet Collins, a Star for Cold War Modern Dance

I am not company material. I'm an individual. I'm star material. I have to be. I'm built that way. But it doesn't mean I'm ambitious. It means that's my gift. I'm not chorus material

--Janet Collins[214]

Janet Collins's path to modern dance began in classical ballet. Her first dance training was from Louise Beverly in Los Angeles, a woman who gave her a model for Black women dancing classical ballet.[215] Collins continued her ballet track and auditioned for Ballet Russes. Although the company recognized her talent, they did not offer her a job because doing so would have required Collins to wear white body paint.[216] She shifted her attention to modern dance when Lester Horton, a Los Angeles-based modern dance choreographer, recruited her into his company for his 1937 production of *Le Sacre du Printemps* at the Hollywood Bowl.[217] During this time, Collins also studied and performed in the modern and Afro-diasporic dance of Katherine Dunham as well as in the ballet and Spanish dance fusion of Carmelita Maracci.[218] All of these dance forms inflected Collins's own choreographic vision and aspirations for dance stardom.

After two years of performing as a modern dance soloist in Los Angeles, her hometown since her family left New Orleans when she was a young child, Collins took on the New York modern dance scene. Performing solos developed with the financial assistance of a 1945 Rosenwald fellowship, she gave the city a preview of her work at a New Dance Group concert in January 1949. A few weeks later, she made her major New York debut at 92Y's Audition Winners' Recital, six years after Primus's turn at the event. 92Y eagerly awaited Collins's appearance at the Audition Winners' Recital. When she had auditioned for it, the committee of

---

[214] Yaël Tamar Lewin and Janet Collins, *Night's Dancer: The Life of Janet Collins* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2015), 86.
[215] Lewin and Collins, *Night's Dancer*, 7.
[216] Ibid., 21.
[217] Ibid., 51.
[218] Ibid., 96, 316.

judges burst into applause.[219] William Kolodney skipped towards her and waved his arms at the prospect of her star power.[220]

92Y's anticipation proved well-placed for Collins's offerings of *Rondo*, a ballet piece set to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and *Spirituals*, a suite comprised of *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen* and *Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel* set to the popular sung spirituals as arranged by African American composer Harold Forsythe.[221] Critics reporting on the event devoted nearly their entire articles to Collins, reminiscent of Primus's time in the recital. Nik Krevitsky for *Dance Observer* commented upon Collins's theatrical and technical mastery gained from her training in the ballet and Spanish dance fusion of Maracci as well as the modern dance techniques of Horton and Dunham.[222] Walter Terry for *New York Herald Tribune* praised Collins at length and deemed her as "the most highly gifted newcomer in many a season."[223] Martin concurred with Krevitsky and Terry. He also made explicit an underlying theme of the other two critics' reports: Collins and her dances ought not to be considered in accordance with her race.[224] Reception of Collins's 92Y Audition Winners' Recital debut illuminated an interpretation of her and her solos as neutralized, universalized, and, paradoxically, racialized.

Collins, like Primus, used the solo recital frame and, within that, precedent for various solo dance themes. She traced Afro-diasporic roots and routes, following lines that connected New Orleans Creole culture and its links to Europe, African American spirituals, and protest

---

[219] Ibid., 118.
[220] Ibid.
[221] "YM-YWHA Audition Winners' Concert, Program," 1949, Events, Education Department, Box 5, 92nd Street Y Archives.
[222] Nik Krevitsky, "Audition Winners," *Dance Observer* 16, no. 3 (March 1949): 37–38.
[223] Walter Terry, "Dance: An Impressive Debut; A Canadian Ballet Festival," *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*, February 27, 1949.
[224] John Martin, "The Dance: Newcomer: Janet Collins in a Brief but Auspicious Debut," *New York Times*, February 27, 1949.

against racial injustice. She augmented these US-centered Afro-diasporic routes with a transnational approach. Collins included Hebraic biblical dances, European classical ballet, and performed as a young Black man in a French court. Similar to the ways in which previous white modern dancers availed themselves of cultural material from around the world, she did so and wove it into her Afro-diasporic mapping. Her Hebraic (connoted as distinctly Jewish) dances complemented the faith of *Spirituals*. Classical ballet and a dance of a young Black man in France connected to Collins's description of herself as "French-Negro, Creole."[225]

Collins tested the limits of Blackness in modern dance during the late 1940s. Whereas Primus pushed against white critics' implication of her in the modern dance/"Negro dance" debate, Collins along with her Black and white critics attempted to prove her to be beyond the confines of those categories in the context of modern dance. Drawing from Collins's writings and personal effects in tandem with her critical reception, I argue that she presented in her solo recitals a vision of the African diaspora as capacious and encompassing European modes of expression that signified whiteness or universality in her early Cold War context. I demonstrate the ways in which Collins's practices of self-universalization along with the Cold War climate impacted critics' interpretations of her and, in turn, rendered her as a star for modern dance in the Cold War.

Collins received far more critical and scholarly attention for her ballet than for her solo recitals, resulting in a dearth of analyses of her impact on modern dance. For example, entries on Collins in historiographies of Black dance by Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, Richard A. Long, Lynne Fauley Emery, and Susan Manning each mention her modern dance, but focus on

[225] "Background and Publicity Material on Janet Collins," 1949, Janet Collins Scrapbook, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

her short time on Broadway or her illustrious career in the Metropolitan Opera Ballet.[226] Ballet historiographies often briefly mention Collins, hailing her as the first Black prima ballerina. Historiographies of both Black dance and ballet position Collins as exceptional for her work in ballet, neglecting her impact on modern dance. Notable exceptions to the Collins lacuna in modern dance scholarship include Collins's (auto)biography written in part by her and then completed by Yaël Tamar Lewin and Gay Morris's brief analysis of her in the context of the Cold War.[227] Collins and Lewin provide insight into Collins's intentions, artistic process, and how her personal struggles impacted her professional life. Morris uses Collins as an example of how Cold War modern dance considered some African American artists as universal, but excised political content of their work in order to do so. In studying Collins's solo recitals, I revise dominant narratives of modern dance. I contribute knowledge on Collins as an artist rarely recognized for her impact on modern dance and promote a fuller understanding of the modern dance aesthetic trends and conventions for representation in which she participated.

Balancing between French-Creole Blackness and Universality

Collins's modern dance solo recitals in the late 1940s were caught in negotiations of Blackness and universality on the modern dance stage. As Manning has argued, the Cold War period witnessed a solidification of racial representation in US modern dance with perceptions of whiteness universalizing modern dance into mythic abstraction and those of Blackness as rendering one body as representative of an Afro-diasporic collective.[228] In addition to these

---

[226] Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today*, Second Edition (Hightstown: Princeton Book Company, 1989); Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, *Black Magic; a Pictorial History of the Negro in American Entertainment* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967); Richard A. Long, *The Black Tradition in American Dance* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989); Susan Manning, *Danses Noires, Blanche Amerique* (Pantin: CND Pantin, 2009).
[227] Lewin and Collins, *Night's Dancer*; Gay Morris, *A Game for Dancers: Performing Modernism in the Postwar Years, 1945-1960* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006).
[228] Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*, xv, 118.

shifting conventions for reading racialized bodies onstage, the Cold War brought about an increased market and value for modern dance that could be understood as abstract or, at least, politically neutral. Modern dance in the Cold War has been well-documented by dance scholars, including Clare Croft, Rebekah Kowal, Morris, Victoria Phillips, and Naima Prevots.[229] Taken together, these authors demonstrate how the Cold War brought about an effort on the part of the US government to rid US culture of communism and ostensibly subversive ideologies while also portraying, and exporting, US culture to the rest of the world as emblematic of freedom. In the case of African American dancers, this often meant a minimization of the political critique in their dances. With her light skin tone and ballet acumen, Collins was able to dance on a fault line between signifiers of Blackness, whiteness, and Cold War aesthetic demands for formalist abstraction.

Whether during her modern dance recitals in the 1940s, 1950 stint on Broadway, or 1951-1954 career as the first African American professional ballerina in the Metropolitan Opera Ballet, Collins was adamantly a soloist. As she recalled the moment she left Dunham's company to embark on a solo career: "I am not company material. I'm an individual. I'm star material. I have to be. I'm built that way. But it doesn't mean I'm ambitious. It means that's my gift. I'm not chorus material."[230] Collins articulated her uniqueness as her star quality. When considering her solo recitals, that proves to be true. They followed the precedent of Primus and Dunham to dance the African diaspora as well as protest against racial oppression. Also similar to the two

---

[229] Clare Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Kowal, *How to Do Things with Dance*.; Morris, *A Game for Dancers*; Victoria Phillips, *Martha Graham's Cold War: The Dance of American Diplomacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Naima Prevots, *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012).
[230] Lewin and Collins, *Night's Dancer*, 86.

women, Collins utilized dominant modern dance idioms as well as Afro-diasporic movement practices. In contrast to Primus, Collins and Dunham were light-skinned and drew from ballet technique. Collins and Primus both included Jewish references in their recitals, unlike Dunham. Although Collins shared much in common with Dunham and Primus, she departed from them in her mode of self-universalization vis-à-vis a combination of signifiers of Blackness and whiteness as a way to perform a definition of Americanness premised on a capacious Afro-diasporic identity that encompassed Europe.

Collins's recitals traveled across national borders and bound those sites together through her solo dancing body. The programs typically began in Europe with *Blackamoor*, a piece about "the court life of Louis XIV as seen through the eyes of the little Blackmoor"; stayed in Europe for *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik,* a ballet suite of solos set to Mozart; moved to the US for her *Spirituals* suite of solos; made their way to Hebraic (specified as Jewish) psalms reminiscent of at-the-time nascent Israel or Eastern Europe in *Three Psalms of David*; went back to the US for *Protest*, a solo about the shooting of a chain gang escapee set to "the earthy 'sinful' songs of Negros—his "Hollers"—"Blues"—and work songs on the chain gang—[that] give voice to his worldly woes;" and ended in New Orleans, Louisiana for a combination of dances showcasing a Creole woman enjoying celebrations or dancing in the city.[231] Or, as Collins characterized her recitals' inspiration, "Black, Ballet, and Bible!"[232]

---

[231] "The Dance Center of the YM-YWHA Presents Janet Collins, Program," 1949, Events, Education Department, Box 5, 92nd Street Y Archives. Quotations are taken from this particular program. Although Collins occasionally altered the order of her recital, the order I present here is representative of her most frequent order as determined from a survey of all extant programs of her modern dance recitals in the 1940s. Discrepancies in her recitals' orders depended on whether or not she included *Protest*. When she included *Protest*, she would often remove other dances to control the program's overall length. Archival materials do not evidence any clear pattern for when or where Collins chose to remove *Protest*.

[232] Lewin and Collins, *Night's Dancer*, 92.

Collins used dominant modern dance idioms throughout her works, connecting the different solos together as facets of American modern dance. In ordering her recital, she interwove her specifically African American works throughout the program. Notably, the African American pieces were the only ones in her recitals that appeared to be US-based. In this way, she positioned African-American lived experiences as simultaneously applicable transnationally and the stitching that brought all of her solos into the category of American modern dance. It is important to note that the French court of *Blackamoor* or European classical ballet of *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* were not Other to Collins. In advertising herself as "French-Negro, Creole,"[233] she emphasized her family history among the Free People of Color in Louisiana and connection to the French culture. Indeed, *Blackamoor* suggested the court of King Louis XIV, who reigned during the French colonization of New Orleans. Critics of Collins's Los Angeles and New York recitals did not attend to the French element of her racial identity. Instead, they interpreted her in relation to the dominant Black/white binary and its requisite associations with culturally specific dance in which one Black body was representative of a collective or modern dance with whiteness standing for universality. The impact of Collins's Creole identity and concomitant definition of Afro-Euro American identity was twofold. First, it enabled her to dance a vision of Americanness grounded in a transnational Afro-diasporic identity that included Europe and spoke to her familial memories of Creole culture. Second, it equipped her critics to emphasize her ballet and European content as signifiers of whiteness and universality.

---

[233] "Background and Publicity Material on Janet Collins."

Similar to Primus's recitals' transnational scope rooted most centrally in African American experiences, Collins sought for her African American identity and themed works to be most emphasized by performance venues. A 1949 publicity sheet for distribution to her recital producers instructed venues to "emphasize Negro aspect of [her] work."[234] Next, venues were to advertise her "versatility in technique. Ballet training, discipline of movement, accomplishment in ballet, rare in Negro dancer" followed by a description of her as "French-Negro, Creole."[235] In fact, the only line in this list of qualities that did not explicitly mention race was "artist as well as dancer."[236] Collins invoked the lines between Blackness and whiteness, as well as their connotations of cultural specificity or universality, in her publicity materials. At the same time as she foregrounded the culturally specific aspect of her work, she asserted the importance of her ballet training and hyphenated "French-Negro, Creole" identity.[237] In other words, she set Blackness and whiteness (as signified through ballet) as oppositional aesthetic practices and then advertised herself as able to use both. Critics of varying racial backgrounds followed Collins's lead by using ballet along with her Hebraic expertise to universalize her work. However, they did so in a way that starkly contrasted her wishes by implicitly racializing her without heeding attention to the culturally specific nature of her Afro-diasporic dances.

Critics from African American, dance, and popular publications varied in their precise interpretations of Collins, but cohered in a process of implicitly racializing her and then explicitly universalizing her body and dances. Critics were particularly able to racialize Collins because she danced themes specific to Afro-diasporic experiences and reminiscent of those

---

[234] Ibid.
[235] Ibid.
[236] Ibid.
[237] Ibid.

performed by Primus and Dunham. However, they were able to only imply that racialization (sometimes while arguing she could not be racialized) because of Collins's heavy use of dance idioms that signified whiteness as well as due to her light skin tone. A journey through the order of Collins's recital reveals the complex intersections among her intentions, choreography, embodiment, and critics' interpretations of her. I argue that, similar to Primus, Collins presented a capacious vision of the African diaspora as US modern dance. Also like Primus, Collins attempted to circumvent the confines of the modern dance/"Negro dance" divide by appealing to transnational discourse. Whereas Primus's attempts to portray her work as universal through transnationalism were largely unsuccessful, Collins's were perhaps too successful. Critics ignored her explicit intentions that her Afro-diasporic works be understood as such. Instead, they neutralized these pieces' political content while emphasizing their inclusion of ballet or proximity to Collins's Hebraic dances.

***Blackamoor* (1947)**

Figure 11: Janet Collins on the Cover of *Dance Magazine*, 1949. Photographer: Constantine. Janet Collins Scrapbook, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Jerome Robbins Dance Division.

Blackamoor opened Collins's recitals with a humorous crossing of gender, national, and temporal borders. Her young Black male trickster-esque character "slyly revealed [Louis XIV's] court life to a highly amused audience" by inserting pantomime throughout two stylized court dances.[238] White dance critics proclaimed the piece's humor. They qualified that humor, though, with instructions that the piece should still be taken as serious dancing. For instance, Doris Hering of *Dance Magazine* wrote of the pieces: "it wasn't the humor of the clown or comic who depends upon grotesquerie and distortion. In both dances the movement was beautifully contained and the laughter was in the point of view."[239] While white dance publications qualified *Blackamoor*'s humor with attention to its serious technique (i.e., French court dances), African American publications rarely mentioned it. Instead, they focused on her humorless ballet, Hebrew dances, and *Spirituals*. Their inattention to *Blackamoor* was striking because Collins was featured on the cover of *Dance Magazine* in costume for the piece the same month as her 92Y debut (Figure 11).

Reception, or lack thereof, of *Blackamoor* indicated how critics of varying social locations sought to move Collins away from theatrical, representational works and towards formalist abstraction's movement technique for the sake of movement. Whereas Collins, who emphasized her French heritage, likely saw the dance as akin to her similarly light-hearted Creole dances, critics pushed the piece away from humor that could have aligned it with the minstrel or commercial stage. White critics could use Collins's technical acumen in French court dances to mark her with signifiers of whiteness. The far-off time and place of a French court also enabled them to understand Collins within frames of mythic abstraction. At the same time, these

[238] Martha Coleman, "Janet Collins," *Dance Observer* 16, no. 5 (May 1949): 69.
[239] Doris Hering, "The Season in Review," *Dance Magazine*, May 1949.

critics' references to Collins's character and humor for the dance as conveying a clownish or distorted, out-of-place Black man implicitly recalled the racialization of the minstrel stage. For African American publications, their neglect of *Blackamoor*'s comedic representation of a young Black man distanced Collins from deleterious stereotypes of the minstrel and commercial stages the piece recalled. By *Blackamoor*'s premiere in 1947, Primus had danced on Broadway and Dunham had achieved fame in Hollywood. Collins, though, could still be situated as belonging solely to an elite concert dance stage that supposedly prioritized technique above all else.

***Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (1947)**

Figure 12: Janet Collins in "Mozart's Rondo," 1949. Phototographer: Carl Van Vechten. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, ©Van Vechten Trust.

Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, comprised of *Allegro*, *Romanza*, *Minuet*, and *Rondo* built on the French court dances of *Blackamoor* by showcasing Collins's ballet technique through a "spacious use of the stage, and simple, lyric movement."[240] Portraits of Collins taken by photographer Carl Van Vechten, a queer white photographer who took many photos of African

[240] Coleman, "Janet Collins."

American artists, including Primus, show her ballet training. For example, in one portrait of her in *Rondo*, she poses in a tendue front with her legs rotated outwards (Figure 12). She holds her torso upright, carrying her arms in a lifted second position with her fingers separated in a way characteristic of Russian ballet technique. A slight head turn towards her leg in tendue adds classical ballet epaulement to the pose. Her tights and bolero recall men's costumes, not women's typical dance dresses, of the era. This costuming choice complements Collins's gender-bending *Blackamoor* while her ballet technique for *Rondo* pulls from *Blackamoor*'s French court dances. Whereas dance publications did not pay significant attention to Collins's ballet or this suite, African American publications highlighted this ballet as a crucial aspect of Collins as an artist.

African American publications used *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* and Collin's expertise in ballet as evidence of her ability to transcend racial barriers. For example, Charley Cherokee of the *Chicago Defender* reported on Collins's performance of *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* at 92Y's 1949 Choreographers' Workshop Recital and proclaimed the "sheer racelessness of Janet."[241] He supported this claim with a description of her as a "brown gal" dancing "one of the most remarkable pieces of classic dancing" for 92Y's interracial audience.[242] Interestingly, Cherokee did not mention her African American *Spirituals* for which she received most critical attention at the time. *Ebony* magazine published an article on Collins alongside a photo spread of her in *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen*. Despite the photograph captions' detailed attention to that solo in terms of African American history and culture, the article qualified that cultural

---

[241] Charley Cherokee, "National Grapevine: Hold Your Hat," *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, April 30, 1949.
[242] Ibid.

specificity with an emphasis on Collins's ballet. Echoing Martin's summary of her 92Y debut, asserting that Collins ought not to be considered according to her race, *Ebony* explained:

> Janet Collins is a highly schooled artist. Unlike most of her current crop of young dancers in America, her technical development includes years of rigorous ballet training. Thoroughly grounded in classical technique, she also performs with equal ease and authority in the modern dance idiom. Such versatility is rarely encountered today. Miss Collins thus cannot accurately be described as a "Negro dancer." Her ballet preparation has equipped her to perform any classical ballet with any of the nation's top troupes.[243]

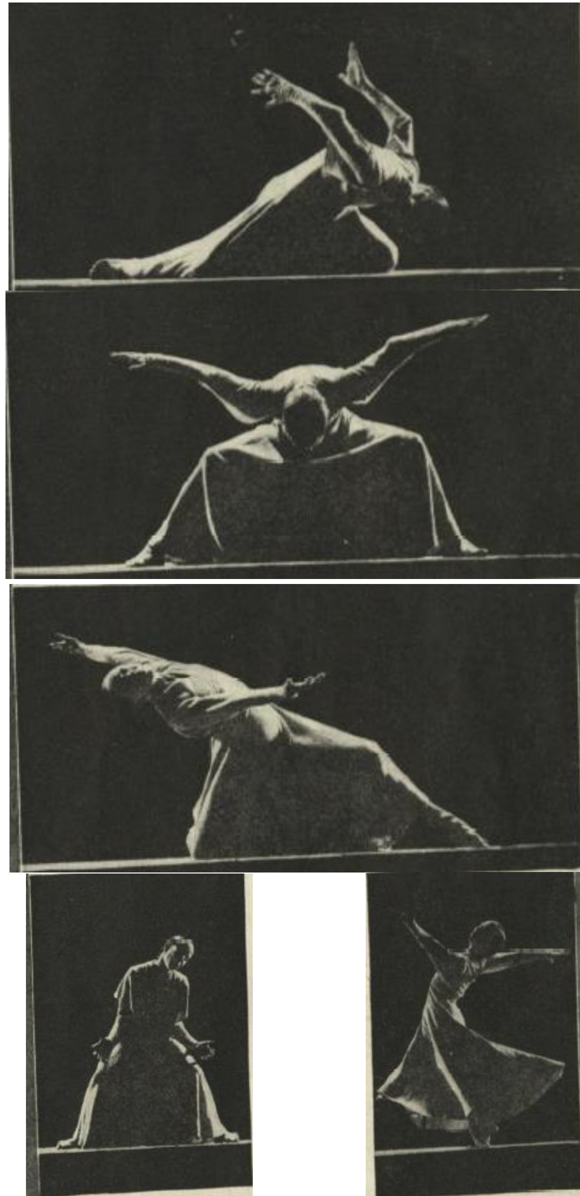
Ebony emphasized Collins's training and inability to be confined by her race because of her ballet. This guarded her from both racist assumptions that African American dancers possessed natural dance talent void of rigorous training as well as the race-based negotiations Primus faced earlier in the decade.[244] Explicit comparisons of Collins to Primus or Dunham were rare. However, *Ebony* and Hughes both assessed that Collins would become just as successful, if not more so, than the two women.[245] Primus and especially Dunham trained in ballet and infused that into their choreography. Collins, though, utilized ballet far more directly than they did. Ballet operated in African American publications' writings on Collins as a signifier of whiteness and, due to the solidification of racial representation during the Cold War outlined by Manning, universality. *Ebony* highlighted that Collins "once danced with Katherine Dunham, is now hailed

[243] "Janet Collins," *Ebony*, September 1949, 54.
[244] For more on racialized assumptions of Black artists as natural dancers, see Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*; Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
[245] "Janet Collins"; Langston Hughes, "Contemplations on Two Movies Three Books and A Dancer," *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, May 7, 1949.

as more finished and versatile artist than her teacher."[246] Ballet training here stood for a "finished and versatile" (i.e., not natural) dance practice. Collins's expertise in ballet enabled her to be classified as raceless. Particularly when paired with emphases on her Hebrew dances, reception of *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* presented Collins as universal and able to successfully take on differently racialized dance techniques. That universalization, though, was premised on critics' investment in the Blackness/whiteness binary of cultural specificity/universality in Cold War modern dance. They desired to push Collins beyond that continuum, but reified its poles in the process.

***Spirituals* (1947)**

[246] "Janet Collins."



Figures 13-17 (top to bottom, left to right): Photos of Janet Collins in *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen* from *Ebony*, 1949. Photographer: Dennis Stock. © Dennis Stock/Magnum Photos.

After *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, Collins's recitals journeyed to African American Christian expressive practices with her *Spirituals* suite of *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen* and *Didn't*

My Lord Deliver Daniel.[247] In *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen*, she employed virtuosic modern dancing filled with lunges, reaches, as well as pauses in vertical and lateral poses reminiscent of her Horton training. Collins's photo spread in *Ebony* featured five of those poses accompanied by detailed descriptions of her body parts' meanings in terms of enslaved subjects and an African American culture informed by that history. In a lunge with head bowed forward and arms raised behind her torso, *Ebony* explained that Collins represented "anguish of oppressed slaves" (Figure 14). In a second position grande plié with her torso parallel to the ground and arms raised to her sides like wings (a pose made famous in Alvin Ailey's 1960 *Revelations*), she stood for "lonesomeness" (Figure 14). Collins embodied a "reaching for deliverance" when reaching on a diagonal from the tip of her left foot to the top of her left hand (Figure 15). A second position demi plié accompanied by a slight torso contraction and fingers sparking outwards at her side represented "sorrows and agonies" (Figure 16). Finally, a "climactic moment" in which she spiraled her torso to an upper right corner represented a "search for deliverance" (Figure 17).[248] *Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel* countered the lamentation of *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen* by emulating a hopeful, joyous sermon through a movement vocabulary of upward-traveling spirals and releases. Throughout both of these dances, Collins's full, floor-length blue-grey dress swished with her movement and filled the negative space created by her large poses.

It is unclear whether Collins or an *Ebony* writer dictated these meanings for her *Spirituals* suite. They matched with Collins's publicity materials and program notes for the piece which

[247] For Collins's *Spirituals* in relation to her 1965 biblical solo *Genesis*, see Jessica Friedman, "Universalizing the Specific: Janet Collins's *Spirituals* and *Genesis*," *Dance Chronicle* 45, no. 3 (2022).
[248] Ibid.

stated "from the abyss of slavery emerged the Spiritual—a whole people—moved as one—lifted its voice to God for deliverance!...in the world beyond."[249] They also resonated with a review of the suite by Sidney Burke for the communist publication *People's World*. In fact, Burke complained that although Collins "offered these dances assuredly in a sense of rebellion or struggle" they lacked an organized counterattack.[250] *Ebony* and Burke stood apart from nearly all other reception of Collins's *Spirituals* in their attention to counter-hegemonic cultural specificity. The *Ebony* photospread centered Collins's articulation of African American oppressions and Burke underscored leftist or communist undertones in her work.

With the partial exception of Ebony's meticulous photograph descriptions accompanied by an article filled with deracialized rhetoric and Burke's demands for greater political emphasis, both African American and white writers neutralized Collins's *Spirituals*. White dance writers often compared the suite to familiar modern dance works. For example, *Dance Magazine*'s Martha Coleman remarked, "*Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen* is reminiscent of another and more famous *Lamentation*, that of Martha Graham,"[251] a piece in which Graham personified grief apart from a specific person or context. In this comparison, Coleman suggested that Collins presented an abstracted spirituality untethered to subjective experience, translated through modern dance idioms. Terry assessed that *Spirituals* "were in no sense pantomimic nor were their actions imprisoned by the specific images established by the words of the songs. They were freely expressive of Miss Collin's [sic] personal reactions to familiar spirituals."[252] He implicitly

[249] "Program Notes for The Dance Center of the YM-YWHA Presents Janet Collins."
[250] Sidney Burke, "Dance in Review: Janet Collins Dances Show Variety, Beauty," *People's World*, October 26, 1949, Janet Collins Scrapbook, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
[251] Coleman, "Janet Collins."
[252] Terry, "Dance."

compared Collins's *Spirituals* to those of previous modern dancers, such as Primus or Helen Tamiris. However, he positioned Collins's work as less connected to the specificity of its accompanying hymns and more of an individual expression than the works of other modern dancers. Both Coleman and Terry situated *Spirituals* as Collins's abstraction of universal emotion in response to a particular musical genre, not the representation of African American church services that she had intended. In so doing, they neglected Collins's specific, perhaps ethnographic, intent for *Spirituals*. She had gathered inspiration for the suite from her time in African American church services and noted about it, "I got that from the people themselves."[253] In order to understand these white dance critics' interpretations of *Spirituals* as well as African American critics' takes on the suite, it is necessary to consider the next part of Collins's recitals—her Hebraic biblical suite *Three Psalms of David*.

***Three Psalms of David* (1947)**

Collins built upon a precedent set by Jewish American modern dancers for biblical works as well as her own love of the bible and Jewish culture with *Three Psalms of David*.[254] In addition to the suite's three solos set to sung psalms, she collaborated with Jewish composer Ernest Bloch, known for his Jewish-inspired works, on a new piece for the suite based on the Genesis story from the bible.[255] Critics rarely described *Three Psalms of David* in as much technical detail as her other pieces. Instead, they focused on the suite and Collins's work with Bloch as a means through which to universalize her and, particularly, her *Spirituals*. It is

[253] Lewin and Collins, *Night's Dancer*, 106.
[254] Ibid., 96. Collins was not aware until later in life that her great-grandfather was likely Jewish.
[255] This collaboration, begun in 1945, ultimately ended due to a falling out between Collins and Bloch. She then commissioned Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos to create a score for the piece in 1954 and then premiered it at her last known performance in 1965.

important to note that in using the words “Hebraic” or “Hebrew” to describe *Three Psalms of David*, critics used mentions of Bloch to connote a particularly Jewish definition of the terms, which could have otherwise signaled more general Judeo-Christian biblical content. In so doing, these critics demonstrated the Jewish assimilation into whiteness that took place during the 1940s by using Bloch and/or Jewish content in *Three Psalms of David* to universalize Collins’s works. At the same time, these writers specified possible generalities of the descriptors “Hebraic” or “biblical” as Jewish. In other words, they used the Jewish assimilation into whiteness as a way to apply significations of whiteness onto Collins when comparing her *Spirituals* to *Three Psalms of David*. For example, Martin used her Jewish dances to generalize the specificity of her *Spirituals* suite. He noted:

> Miss Collins happens to be a Negro, but she is not fairly to be described as a ‘Negro dancer.’ That she is aware of her racial background is evident in the spirituals, but they are in every sense dances rather than an exploitation of heritage. She is equally interested in Hebraic dances and has been working on the West Coast, which is her home, with Ernest Bloch on a series of them for which he is composing the music.[256]

In this review for a recital which did not include *Three Psalms of David*, Martin highlighted that suite as evidence that Collins ought to be considered as more universal of a dancer than as an African American artist choreographing on African American themes.

Martin’s use of Collins’s Jewish works was joined by Los Angeles and African American writers. These writers combined their emphases on ballet with attention to the Jewish dances as a means to further push Collins beyond racial confines. For example, *Ebony* insisted that her

[256] Martin, “The Dance.”

recitals were "much broader" than "racial material" and detailed her work with Bloch as proof.[257] Los Angeles critics also coupled her African American and Hebrew content. For instance, one report of Collins's 1948 performance at University of California, Los Angeles explained, "for years she has done research on Negro and Hebrew dance material, having worked with Ernest Bloch, the celebrated composer and authority on Hebrew music."[258] In emphasizing Collins's Hebrew dances and work with Bloch, these writers foregrounded a particular mode of training that contrasted common contemporary assumptions of African American dancers naturally performing Africanist idioms. Additionally, they depicted Collins and her choreography as more abstract than would seem at first glance. By qualifying *Spirituals* with her expertise in Jewish biblical idioms, critics attempted to define Collins as a neutral body able to take on a range of spiritual practices in equal ways. In the case of African American critics, attention to Collins's Hebrew expertise accompanied their consistent emphases on her ballet, light skin-tone, and interracial audiences to prove her as able to succeed beyond racial barriers confronted by Primus and Dunham. The intentionality of these writers' acts to universalize Collins's African American and Jewish spiritual pieces cannot be understated as they consistently did so even when she only performed *Spirituals* and not *Three Psalms of David*.

***Protest* (1947)**

[257] "Janet Collins."
[258] "'Dance Festival,'" March 24, 1948, Clipping, Janet Collins Scrapbook, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Figure 18: Janet Collins in *Protest*, 1949. Photographer: W.E. Owen. Janet Collins Scrapbook, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Jerome Robbins Dance Division.

The very specific, yet interpreted as ambiguously universal, *Spirituals* and *Three Psalms of David* led into *Protest*. Collins designed all of her own costumes. For *Protest*, she created a black and white striped dress with a red panel in the center. The stripes represented those of a chain gang prisoner's uniform as well as a cross and the red panel evoked a sea of blood.[259] Her signature pose for the piece (Figure 18) resonates with Primus's hope pose in *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* with one hand reaching upwards to something greater than what binds her to earth. Collins's other hand clenches in a fist and pushes downwards. Her arms together make the shape of a cross matching the symbolism of her dress. Her torso stretches to one side, invoking her Horton training, while her head leans to one side with her chin raised and her ear to the sky, calling upon her ballet epaulement. When her dance climaxes in the death of her chain gang character, her dress's symbolism manifests in ways reminiscent of her *Spirituals*' Christianity.

[259] Ibid.

The center panel of her dress opens a sea of blood red fabric onto her stark black and white cross stripes.

In stark contrast to Primus's protest pieces, Collins's *Protest* received few, and often negative, reviews. When white dance critics mentioned it, they characterized it as a disappointment or as choreographically lacking.[260] African American writers mentioned it even more rarely than their white counterparts. A review of Collins's recital in *Atlanta Daily World* describing *Protest* as "undoubtedly the hardest work of all. And she does it soulfully" stood as an exception to the lack of press on the piece.[261] The lack of attention to *Protest* spoke to critics' attempts to universalize and, therefore, deracialize Collins. *Blackamoor* could be mitigated by the piece's French court dances; *Spirituals* could be melded into *Three Psalms of David*; and Collins as an artist could be qualified with her ballet technique. In contrast, *Protest* could not easily be explained in generalizing ways.

Protest was by far Collins's most theatrical solo. She clearly represented through movement, music, and costume the story of a chain gang member. She dramatically acted that character's death by gunshot. Every movement served her narrative and could not be reasonably interpreted as a display of technique apart from representational meaning. In other words, *Protest* was firmly rooted in theatricalism and could not be explained as part of formalist abstraction in any way. The solo's explicit depiction of a shooting of a chain gang escapee accompanied by blues music and a costume symbolic of unjust deaths of African Americans prevented neutralizing (or whitening) interpretations. Instead of attempting to find ways in which the piece could be construed as universal, critics largely ignored it.

---

[260] Coleman, "Janet Collins"; Hering, "The Season in Review."
[261] "Janet Collins Creates Something 'New' In Dancing," *Atlanta Daily World (1932-)*, November 10, 1948.

Collins's *Protest* and Primus's *Study in Nothing* shared similar trajectories. Both artists continued to regularly perform these works even as they resulted in little or poor critical reception, indicating the importance they saw in them. Both African American and white critics ignored *Study in Nothing* because of its lack of culturally-specific content. In so doing, they refused Primus the opportunity to earn a reputation as part of a new wave of choreographers engaged in formalist abstraction. In the case of *Protest*, Collins's African American and white critics neglected the piece because of its overt theatricalism and undeniably specific story. They pushed Collins into interpretations of a universality reliant upon signifiers of whiteness that aligned more with formalist abstraction than with theatricalism. In refusing Collins the opportunity to be understood in alignment with theatrical aesthetic imperatives, critics deracialized her body and work by neglecting her representation of Blackness in the US. Their act of doing so, however, was premised on their investment in a Black/white binary in US modern dance that also divided theatricalism from formalist abstraction. In other words, critics' attempts to argue that Collins was beyond race reified codes for racial representation in US modern dance.

***La Creole* (1947), *Apre Le Mardi Gras* (1947), *Juba* (1947), and *New Orleans Carnival* (1947)**

Figure 19: Janet Collins in "New Orleans Carnival," 1949. Photographer: by Carl Van Vechten. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, ©Van Vechten Trust.

Collins concluded her recitals by journeying to New Orleans and showcasing Creole culture. Although she was too young when her family moved from New Orleans to Los Angeles to have formed many memories of the place, she drew upon her family stories in these works. This portion of the recital included some combination of *La Creole*, about a woman dreaming of dancing at a quadroon ball, *Apre Le Mardi Gras*, about an intoxicated young woman at a Mardi Gras celebration, *Juba*, or *New Orleans Carnival*. These dances undergirded the rest of her recital. The particular transnational Afro-diasporic routes and roots that Collins positioned as the Americanness of American modern dance in her recital emphasized the French aspect of Creole identity. Her New Orleans dances embodied the connections between Blackness and Frenchness suggested in *Blackamoor* or the classical ballet of *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* followed by *Spirituals*.

Film of *Apre Le Mardi Gras* shows Collins swishing a full, ruffled skirt (Figure 19) while circling her hips in figure eights invoking her Dunham technique.[262] She juxtaposes this Africanist pelvic movement with balletic and upright torso and arm carriage punctuated with occasional contractions that sharply bring her torso to face the ground. Collins flirtatiously dances towards an accompanying drummer only to then forget his presence and enjoy her own solo dancing. She flaunts her flexibility with occasional brushes of her leg high to the front. *Apre Le Mardi Gras*, along with Collins's other New Orleans dances, uses the most Africanist aesthetics of all of her recital. In doing so and in closing her recital with these pieces, Collins presents Creole identity as the central location of her vision of an Afro-diasporic Americanness for American modern dance.

Critics paid little attention to Collins's light, joyous, and humorous works set in New Orleans compared to *Three Psalms of David*, *Spirituals*, or *Blackamoor*. Coleman, Hering, and Terry commented upon Collins's stylishness and excellent technique in the dances.[263] Coleman implicitly placed these Afro-diasporic dances in a continuum with those of Primus and Dunham, noting that "*Juba* exploited the familiar, but always exciting African native dance, being neither more nor less original than those this audience was no doubt acquainted with."[264] As in numerous critics' implications of prior modern dance spirituals when discussing Collins's *Spirituals*, Coleman recognized Collins as entering into an established presentational frame and turned attention to her technical expertise in that frame rather than her originality. Coleman's

---

[262] vintage video clips, *Janet Collins (Dancer) - after the Mardi Gras (1949)*, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YILsJ9Rbwk.
[263] Coleman, "Janet Collins"; Hering, "The Season in Review"; Walter Terry, "The Dance World: 3 Days of Dance Magic Given by Jose Limon, Janet Collins," *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*, April 10, 1949.
[264] Coleman, "Janet Collins."

claim that Collins's Africanist movement was less authentic than that of previous dancers, such as Primus or Dunham, likely was more due to Collins's skin tone and implication in universalization than her dance steps. Although Collins's New Orleans dances drew from ballet, they followed recognizable principles of Dunham technique. At the point of Coleman's review, Primus had not yet completed her ethnographic trip to Africa and her African dances heavily used US modern dance idioms. In framing Collins as inauthentic in her uses of Africanist dance, Coleman pushed her away from theatrical representation of a culturally specific site and towards a more universal rendition of quasi-Africanist movement.

African American critics did not write about these New Orleans works, even though Collins included them in nearly every recital. By excising these pieces and *Blackamoor*, African American critics elected to focus on Collins's more apparently serious dances. *Blackamoor* and Collins's New Orleans dances both evoked French imperial power in relation to Blackness. Instead of accounting for how Collins subverted or decolonized that imperial presence through humor in the dances, African American critics ignored the works. In neglecting Collins's heaviest use of Dunham technique, these critics also foreclosed comparison between the two women that would have necessitated a relationality between Collins and the commercial stage. Whether by focusing on Collins's stylish technique in her New Orleans solos or ignoring them, both white and African American critics neglected the culturally specific and familial autobiographical nature of them. Collins concluded her recitals in her familial home of New Orleans, ending with Creole identity center stage. Similar to *Protest*, though, this finale could not be explained into neutralization by other pieces in the show.

Making Collins a Universal Modern Dance Star

Critics' minimization of Collins's culturally specific content is symptomatic of modern dance in the Cold War. As Morris explains, US modern dance during the Cold War witnessed a turn towards universalism that necessitated an erasure of African American choreographers' racial content.[265] Although this trend did not take place as much in other US cities, such as Chicago, it took hold of New York's modern dance scene and impacted dance production and interpretation. Morris points out that this minimization of racial content coincided with a stronger acceptance and presence of African Americans and Africanist movement in modern dance and mainstream cultural production, as well as a desire among US national commentators to suppress US American issues, such as racism, in fear of a Soviet takeover.[266] In a brief discussion of Collins, Morris describes how critics in the early 1950s melded her *Spirituals* and *Three Psalms of David* as religious-inspired dances.[267] Just as the case of Primus's intersecting layers of reference were galvanized by her Cultural Front and wartime context, critics' universalization of Collins worked in tandem with Cold War aesthetic imperatives. Cold War aesthetics required Collins to be considered as an abstract artist engaged in universal dance in order to be the star she wanted to be when she left Dunham's company. Her light complexion and mastery of ballet rendered her particularly apt to be interpreted in line with Cold War aesthetics even when her choreography insisted on theatrical representation. Or, as Hering defined one of Collins's first solo recitals in New York, it was a "happy event…for the future of American Dance," a dance enmeshed in the Cold War and a disentanglement of theatricalism from formalist abstraction.[268]

---

[265] Morris, *A Game for Dancers*.
[266] Ibid., 147-148.
[267] Ibid., 151.
[268] Hering, "The Season in Review."

Modern dance during the Cold War hung in a balance between portraying freedom for international audiences while not being so free that it could be perceived domestically as subversive and fall under the attention of state surveillance.[269] Choreographers engaged in formalist abstraction, characterized by movement untethered to meaning, answered the requirements of modern dance in the Cold War. Although formalist abstraction had been in use since modern dance's earliest days, it took on a new importance during the Cold War as a means to obfuscate interpretations of artists and their art as leftist or queer, both of which were prevalent in modern dance communities. Cold War aesthetics employed formalist abstraction as a way to dance on the fault line between freedom and subversion. As the emergence of Cold War aesthetics coincided with, what Manning termed, a solidification of racial representation,[270] the growing divide between theatricalism and formalist abstraction took on racialized implications.

In addition to critics' excision of culturally specific meanings from Collins's oeuvre, they imposed formalist abstraction onto her body and dances. White dance critics noted Collins's theatricalism via her ability to gauge humor, to communicate with audiences, and her lack of obstruse choreography.[271] This attention to her theatrical uses of representation or narrative, however, was dominated by emphasis on her technique as abstract or universal. In *Dance Magazine* and *Vogue* features on Collins, the publications did not mention race or the specificity of her works and, instead, listed her technical expertise across multiple disciplines.[272] Focusing

[269] Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats*; Kowal, *How to Do Things with Dance*; Morris, *A Game for Dancers*; Phillips, *Martha Graham's Cold War*; Prevots, *Dance for Export*.
[270] Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*, xv, 118.
[271] Coleman, "Janet Collins"; Hering, "The Season in Review"; Martin, "The Dance"; Terry, "Dance."
[272] "Dance Magazine Awards: The Outstanding Debutante of the Season 1948-1949 Janet Collins," *Dance Magazine*, 1949, Janet Collins Scrapbook, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts; "People and Ideas: Before Band Wagons," *Vogue*, August 15, 1949.

on technique and abstract feeling over specific narratives, *Vogue* detailed, “her distinguishing mark is the beauty of her coupling formal ballet and modern movement. … A great artist she is intent on the spirit rather than the story.” Here, greatness was located in mastery of established dance techniques and in distancing oneself from narratives tied to theatricalism. Los Angeles publications resembled *Dance Magazine*’s and *Vogue*’s features. Even when mentioning Collins’s ability to communicate with audiences, they drew attention to her versatile technique with an emphasis on ballet and fluid movement.[273] Similarly, African American publications consistently stressed her ballet technique. In so doing, they refused racially determined definitions of Collins and emphasized her virtuosity in a mode of dance even more Eurocentric than modern dance. Writings by critics of varying racial backgrounds resonated with Thomas F. DeFrantz’s articulation of a conundrum faced by Ailey—Collins’s contemporary and fellow alumnus of Lester Horton Dance Theater—in the 1950s: “for white audiences and critics to understand African American excellence in modern dance, their work had to be read as ‘universal’ in theme.”[274] In addition to explaining Collins’s excellence, critics’ simultaneous rhetoric of technique and universalism roughly fit her recitals into Cold War aesthetic imperatives.

White dance critics highlighted Collins’s technique in ways that rendered not only her dances, but also her body as abstract. For example, Hering saw Collins’s technique as one of “dream dancing,” a mode defined by her body’s alacrity and spontaneity.[275] Terry emphasized a

---

[273] “Dance Art Evokes Spell,” *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, November 5, 1947; “‘Dance Festival’”; Shirle Duggan, “Janet Collins’ Artistry Gains,” 1948, Janet Collins Scrapbook, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
[274] Thomas DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 21.
[275] Hering, “The Season in Review.”

natural or compulsive quality to Collins's dance, citing it as "a primal urgency to move," "pure movement compulsion," and "kinesthetic wonders of compulsive dance."[276] In describing it as natural, he positioned it as in some ways abstract or as movement free from constraints of meaning. Characterizations of Collins's dancing as natural were part and parcel of a long history of African American dancers facing critics' racialized assumptions that they were naturally gifted dancers, particularly in Africanist forms. This history has been well documented by numerous dance scholars, especially by Brenda Dixon Gottschild and Manning.[277] The case of Collins is enmeshed in this history and requires nuance. Critics' descriptions of her natural or compulsive movement, indeed, revealed their racialized assumptions. However, their constant qualifications of those descriptions with details of her rigorous ballet technique pushed her slightly out of those racialized confines. Additionally, and especially in the case of her oft-written about *Spirituals*, descriptions of Collins as engaged in compulsive, kinesthetic movement promoted a sense of her as an abstract (implicitly raced) body dancing a universally accessible pool of kinesthetic sensations. The ambiguity of this interpretation of Collins's body and choreography enabled her to be placed within the parameters of a Cold War aesthetic preference for formalist abstraction. It also harkened back to Martin's early conceptions of modern dance as performing a kinesthetic sympathy in which dancers and spectators had access to a universal field of emotion.[278] In this way, descriptions of Collins as an abstract body dancing universal content situated her within US modern dance history and poised for its future.

---

[276] Terry, "Dance"; Terry, "The Dance World"; Walter Terry, "The Dance," *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*, July 10, 1949.
[277] Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*; Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*.
[278] Martin, *The Modern Dance*.

In neutralizing Collins's body and work by fitting them roughly into formalist abstraction, critics were able to hold her up as a star for this new era of modern dance, one detached from meaning and "ethnic" modes of expression. Although *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* could be reasonably classified as formalist in its lack of overt representation or narrative, the remainder of her recitals' solos employed theatrical practices to represent certain culturally specific meanings. Collins did not choreograph using formalist abstraction in any meaningful way. However, critics' neutralization of her body and dances into an abstract body performing, for example, Africanist movement mitigated by ballet or African American spirituality qualified by Hebrew psalms, explained her work as neutral in such a way that rendered it as adherent to Cold War aesthetic imperatives. Critics also explained Collins in this way to circumvent assignations of her work as ethnic dance. As Kowal has documented, the 1940s witnessed a splintering of modern dance in which ethnic dance emerged as a distinct category.[279] In minimizing the cultural specificity of Collins's works, critics prevented her from entering the arena of ethnic dance while also showcasing her as the star soloist she wanted to be.

Although Collins did not publicly comment on misinterpretations of her dances nearly as often as Primus, her own writing clarified her understanding of critics' processes of universalization. In fact, Collins adopted that process in a performance review she wrote for 92Y's member bulletin of Chaja Goldstein, a Jewish singing mime. Writing in the end of 1949, after her publicity materials emphasizing cultural specificity, Collins revealed the mechanics of universalization. She described Goldstein as using material "from Jewish folklore and culture."

---

[279] Rebekah J. Kowal, *Dancing the World Smaller: Staging Globalism in Mid-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

This characterization was followed by an explanation that "folk art is universal in appeal in that the basic emotions of man remain the same regardless of racial and national differences in character."[280] She universalized Goldstein's work in line with Cold War aesthetics. However, she explicitly drew attention to the racial and national lines she crossed to do so. Here, she demonstrated the ways in which presentations of geographically or ethnically specific themes could be understood as such even when discursively insisting on those themes as universal. In her recitals, Collins presented culturally specific work and writers generalized that content by blurring racial, national, and spiritual distinctions. Critics adhered Cold War aesthetic imperatives for formalist abstraction and its supposed allowance for universality onto her without her active participation in them choreographically. Her review of Goldstein, though, showed she understood the mechanics of that interpretive process. She even invoked it in her writing in a way that furthered the blurring of African American and Hebrew culture other critics performed when assessing her dances. In this way, Collins complicated the Cold War continuum for racial representation that ranged from cultural specificity to universality.

The case of Collins's solo recitals demonstrates that Cold War aesthetics were not limited to a dance's choreography or visual presentation. Rather, they could also be affixed through interpretation onto dances that were in many ways antithetical to the demands of those aesthetic imperatives. In this way, Cold War aesthetics should be understood as a set of artistic principles, a mode of interpretation, and a mechanism of corporeal discipline. By claiming Collins's work as in line with Cold War aesthetics, critics could present her as a neutral modern dancer, not as an

---

[280] Janet Collins, "Chaja Goldstein Acclaimed at American Debut at Y," *The "Y" Bulletin*, December 21, 1949, 92Y Bulletin Archive.

ethnic dancer or as a dancer engaged in overt political or social commentary. The universalization of Collins erased what could be considered by state surveillance as subversive, namely, the lived experience of Blackness in the United States. It also enabled her to become the concert dance star she always knew herself to be.

***

Conclusion

A comparison of Primus and Collins draws attention to how they responded to and created shifting definitions of Blackness and the permeability of national borders on the modern dance stage during the 1940s. Primus's and Collins's solo recitals functioned as transnational journeys that mobilized the African diaspora as geographically and politically capacious. Whereas Primus evoked intersecting layers of reference that placed African American struggles within broader conversations of transnational leftism, Collins used modern dance and ballet to articulate various lived experiences of African Americans in conjunction with Hebraic and ballet pieces. Primus's recitals traveled through Africa and the Americas. Collins's performances used Africanist dance vocabulary as set in the US and traveled to Europe through a Creole connection. Primus and Collins staged Blackness as transnationally engaged in their solos. Both women tried to circumvent the modern dance versus "Negro dance" divide by complicating shifting ideas of universality. Primus did so by attempting to universalize her works as she described them in transnational terms. Collins did so by highlighting her ballet expertise and French heritage. Critics negotiated whether Primus was a modern dancer or a "Negro dancer" when discussing her race. In contrast, they argued Collins was beyond race, though in ways that implicitly racialized her.

Reception of Primus and Collins as well as the artists' own discourse on their works were influenced by the artists' contemporary geopolitics. Aided by wartime mobilization and its inclusion of minoritized subjects into a US national identity as well as transnational causes presented by the Double V Campaign and leftist activism, Primus achieved a tenuous acceptance as a US modern dancer while also in community with global struggles for justice. Crucially, though, this position was premised on her ability to present what white dance critics deemed to be authentic Africanist aesthetics as filtered through modern dance idioms. In other words, modern dance critics accepted Blackness if it was translated into familiar dance techniques. For Collins, dancing at the onset of the Cold War in the late 1940s, Blackness on the modern dance stage needed to be minimized and universalized. Her Blackness both was and was not accepted by dance critics. She was rendered as an abstract body and her culturally specific dances as neutral responses to universal emotions. In addition to Cold War aesthetics, a rise of ethnic dance during the 1940s contributed to the minimization of race in Collins's work. The new dance genre cleared a path for modern dance's move towards formalist abstraction. Although Primus and Collins made their major New York debuts at the same recital and venue only six years apart, the rapid changes both geopolitically and in modern dance during the decade rendered interpretations of their work in sharp distinction. Despite their disparate reception, both artists used the solo recital frame in ways that staged their bodies and choreographies as the Americanness of American modern dance in ways that insisted upon a transnational definition of Afro-diasporic aesthetics and politics. Taken together, their work shows how the aesthetic disentanglement of theatricalism and formalist abstraction resulted in a solidification of the racial borders of the two modes of dance.

***

Epilogue: Shapeshifting into Ethnic Dance, Broadway, and Ballet

Primus and Collins moved away from modern dance in 1949. With the financial support of a Rosenwald Fellowship, Primus embarked on a 1949 ethnographic research trip to West Africa. This trip significantly altered the trajectory for her career. She turned her choreographic focus to African cultures and dances. Although she occasionally featured her 1940s solos in her African-focused recitals in the 1950s, the majority of those programs were comprised of large group works. This artistic change resulted in Primus's move into the burgeoning genre of ethnic dance. Her post-1949 Africanist works could be understood by critics as presenting specific facets of African cultures, not as modern dance interpretations. Primus's trip to Africa and move to ethnic dance had strategic timing. The FBI had been building a file on her since 1944 due to her communist ties.[281] They surveilled her dance recitals, life, and collected testimonies of her colleagues who were willing to speak of her Communist Party affiliation. The FBI file most focused on Primus's dances of protest, such as *Hard Time Blues*, and her work at interracial solidarity events connected to the Communist Party, not her Africanist works such as *African Ceremonial*.[282] The increased chokehold of the Red Scare at the end of the decade rendered it an opportune time for Primus to depart from her modern dance protest works. Additionally, modern dance's aesthetic disentanglement of theatricalism and formalist abstraction rendered the latter as *the* aesthetic for modern dance on the concert stage. As evidenced by the case of *Study in Nothing*, Primus was unable to gain recognition for her abstract works. Ethnic dance allowed

---

[281] Federal Bureau of Investigation, "FBI File on Pearl Primus," 1944-1969.
[282] Ibid.

theatricalism and, more importantly, the women and/or artists of color who could not escape assignations of theatricalism on their bodies and dances.

In addition to providing a financially viable genre for Primus's theatrical dances, ethnic dance functioned as a way in which she could pursue her research and choreography of African dance while appearing benign to the FBI. However, the FBI did not lose interest in her after her 1949 trip to Africa. A US government official confiscated her passport in 1952, citing her communist sympathies.[283] Consequently, Primus and Herbert Monte Levy, her counsel from the American Civil Liberties Union, testified for the FBI. Levy described Primus to the FBI as "a very prominent dancer and one who particularly is highly regarded in the Colored entertainment world…who has attracted considerable attention by doing the 'authentic African stomp.'"[284] He attempted to show her as a commercial performer, not one on the concert stage. By claiming Primus's most notable dance as her "authentic African stomp,"[285] Levy positioned her as a presenter of authentic African dance, not as a choreographer in the authorial sense. He distanced her from any connotations of modern dance. Primus explained to the FBI that she aligned with the Communist Party between 1943 and 1947 because she thought that they would serve African American interests. She claimed that she renounced her communist sympathies after returning from a 1944 research trip to the US South.[286] According to Primus, she went to the *Daily Worker* office to suggest a petition to end Jim Crow and a representative for the newspaper told her they could not do anything about that at the moment because the country was at war.[287] Primus's

[283] Ibid.
[284] Ibid.
[285] Ibid.
[286] Ibid.
[287] Ibid.

testimony was not particularly convincing. For instance, she claimed that she renounced communist sympathies in 1944, but at other times said 1947 was her final year aligning with the Party. The FBI continued to build their file on her through 1969, though with less rigor and regularity than during 1944-1952.[288] In this way, Primus's move away from modern dance served aesthetic, financial, and political purposes.

Collins transitioned from modern dance to Broadway and then ballet at the close of the 1940s. Instead of embarking on a national modern dance solo recital tour she had planned at the end of 1949 into 1950, she joined the cast of *Out of This World* (1950). This new Broadway musical by Cole Porter, directed by Agnes de Mille and choreographed by Hanya Holm, increased Collins's fame on the commercial stage. In ways resonant with their reviews of her modern dance, African American critics highlighted her ability to transcend racial barriers by dancing a soloist role in the musical. For example, Al White of the *Chicago Defender* explained Collins as "an integrated member of the cast, she dances with the other leading performers who throw the color line smack into Central Park—a short distance from the Century theater—and accept this young woman on her ability."[289] He concluded by noting that "Collins is one of the few colored performers who has a white understudy."[290] Modern dance critics, too, applauded Collins's performance in the musical. They used the work, though, as a way to heighten the divide between theatricalism as Broadway and formalist abstraction as modern dance. For example, Martin praised the dance in *Out of This World* by claiming "[Holm] is a highbrow and

---

[288] "Onwin Borde, Percussionist Who Worked in Dance, Dies at 51," *The New York Times*, June 5, 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/05/arts/music/05borde.html. Primus gave birth to her son Onwin Borde in 1955, perhaps contributing to the FBI's loosening of its surveillance on her.
[289] Al White, "Broadway Finds Another 'Queen'; First Nighters Another 'Sender': She's Pretty Janet Collins of Play, 'Out Of This World,'" *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, March 24, 1951.
[290] Ibid.

a long-hair and all the rest of it, right out of the modern dance concert field, she does not look down her nose at the Broadway medium" and describing Collins's technical excellence in Holm's abstract choreography.[291] He attempted to assuage the exodus of many female modern dancers to Broadway by writing of Broadway as a less artistic endeavor than concert dance and of Holm and Collins providing the genre with some artistic integrity by using formalist modern dance idioms.

After her run in *Out of This World*, Collins joined the Metropolitan Opera Ballet in 1951. She made history as the first professional Black prima ballerina during her 1951-1954 career at the Met. She was able to build on her commercial success on Broadway as her ballet career blurred commercial, ballet, and opera audiences. As US modern dance in the 1950s increasingly prioritized white men engaged in formalist abstraction, Collins achieved financial viability in these other, theatrical performance venues. After 1954, Collins taught ballet and modern dance and worked on modern dance choreography in bursts. This choreography, as well as her reputation among dance peers, stalled numerous times due to Collins's deteriorating mental health. When suffering from depression after an ill-fated elopement in 1939, Collins was admitted into a hospital in her home state of California for psychiatric care.[292] While in the care of this hospital, she experienced the fate of many patients suffering from mental illness at that time, especially women of color, and was sterilized without her knowledge or consent.[293] The sadness this incident caused never left her and neither did bouts of depression.[294] Collins gave her last public performance in 1965, dancing a still-in-process *Genesis,* the work she had begun

[291] John Martin, "The Dance: Out of This World," *New York Times*, 1951.
[292] Lewin and Collins, *Night's Dancer*, 66.
[293] Ibid., 67.
[294] Ibid., 245.

in 1945 with Bloch for a Jewish biblical suite of dances. Previous documentation and scholarship of Collins's career has often been limited to her successful time at the Met due to her multiple changes of performance genre and career gaps due to mental health struggles. When tracing Collins's career from her modern dance recitals of the 1940s through her last performance in 1965, her ability to shapeshift and challenge dance conventions and genres is revealed. Both Primus and Collins challenged the limits for representations of Blackness on the concert stage and took on other performance genres when modern dance no longer served their needs as it shifted in ways that marginalized their identities and aesthetics.

Chapter 2:

Re-Embodying National Bodies: Sophie Maslow's and Eve Gentry's Americana Dances

Sophie Maslow and Eve Gentry utilized the Americana frame to re-imagine and re-embody United States national identities. As key members and teachers of New Dance Group, a leftist modern dance group in New York's Lower East Side, they practiced dance as social critique in line with the Cultural Front. They built on precedent for the Americana frame as a vehicle for enacting a national identity based on a constructed past and, in particular, nostalgic longings for an artificial vision of Americanness. Maslow juxtaposed movement and sound to generate an incongruous national identity premised on a socialist vision of common people in her *Folksay* (1942) and *Champion* (1948). Gentry used her repertoire to satirize and exaggerate representations of Americanness from the modern dance and commercial stages. She critiqued the racial and gendered representations those dance genres required as well as, in the case of the commercial stage, capitalistic forces that supported those representational conventions. In their subversions of nostalgic Americana dances recognizable to a modern dance audience, Maslow and Gentry challenged homogenous visions of national identity and the systems of power undergirding those aesthetic and ideological imaginings. I argue that, though in disparate ways, both artists used disjunctive choreographic tactics to intervene in the Americanness promoted by their chosen iterations of the Americana frame.

In this chapter, I analyze Maslow's and Gentry's Americana dances and interrogate their radical nostalgic imaginings. I trace how both women embodied and contested dominant understandings of the US nation and the bodies who comprise it. Both women's uses of theatricalism and Americana themes meshed with wartime mobilization and elicited positive

reception. As US modern dance veered towards formalist abstraction, though, critics increasingly understood Maslow's and Gentry's dances as too clearly representational. The women's national critique furthered these critics' negative responses to their works. In addition to the shifts from wartime mobilization to the Cold War and from theatricalism to formalist abstraction, the assimilation of Jews and other European ethnicities into whiteness during the 1940s functioned as a key contextual factor in Maslow's and Gentry's dances. Maslow staged her integrated casts as an inclusive socialist mode of belonging. However, that mode of integration also evoked processes of assimilation. Gentry performed vitriolic representations of southern white women's complicity in racism in ways that contested her body's proximity to those women as a consequence of assimilation.

Maslow's and Gentry's complex resistance to the assimilation of Jews into dominant understandings of whiteness resonated with Jewish socialism's focus on the working class and social justice apart from dominant classes. Jewish socialism, characterized by an anti-capitalist and pro-working-class outlook in Jewish communities, was a dominant mode of identification for Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the US from the 1880s through World War II.[295] As daughters of Eastern European Jewish immigrants and as active participants in New Dance Group in New York's Lower East Side, Maslow and Gentry were deeply aware of Jewish socialism. Maslow's working-class parents, whom she classified as "Russian-Jewish intelligentsia," were part of those Jewish immigrants who advanced Jewish socialist ideologies.[296] I suggest that in addition to viewing Maslow's and Gentry's Americana works as

[295] Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 50.
[296] Sophie Maslow, Sophie Maslow Interview, 1976, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

part and parcel of the Cultural Front as practiced by New Dance Group, they should be considered in relation to Jewish socialist visions of communitarian (trans)national formations.

In order to account for Maslow's and Gentry's disjunctive choreographies of Americanness, I reconstruct their most consistently performed Americana pieces from the 1940s. As for this dissertation's other case studies, I follow the recital orders most often used by the artists. This enables an examination of how distinct meanings manifested across the duration of their performances. Much more archival material remains and is publicly accessible for Maslow than for Gentry, as explained in this chapter's analysis of Gentry. Consequently, I am able to reconstruct the former's dances in much greater detail than the latter. Critical theories of nostalgia and its radical possibilities, especially those of Svetlana Boym and Alastair Bonnett, aid an interrogation of how Maslow and Gentry stretched limits of the Americana frame. In assessing how the artists enacted visions of the nation and national bodies, I follow Benedict Anderson's and Anne McClintock's conceptualizations of nation. Anderson defines a nation as an imagined community characterized by, perhaps arbitrary, boundaries and a sense of horizontal comradeship among national community members.[297] McClintock builds upon and diverges from Anderson's argument by highlighting how nations are not merely imagined, but are crucially enacted through performances that reify constructions of social difference, especially of gender.[298] These theorizations resonate with the interventions of Maslow and Gentry. The artists used the Americana frame to critique homogeneity and to stage inclusive visions of a national

---

[297] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 2006), 49-50.
[298] Anne Mcclintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 353.

community. In their uses of disjuncture, satire, and exaggeration, they demonstrated the artificial construction of national borders and bodies.

I begin this chapter with an explication of Maslow's and Gentry's leftist works in the 1930s. These works transformed into their Americana works with the onset of wartime mobilization. In light of the women's assimilatory cultural context, I demonstrate how the women articulated the racial politics of assimilation and its impact on African Americans in their Americana works. I then analyze Maslow's interventions in the Americana frame followed by those of Gentry. This chapter develops my analysis of the capacious Americana frame in the Introduction of this dissertation by showing how two artists mobilized particular versions of it for their own political means. It also nuances this dissertation's interrogation of the aesthetic disentanglement of theatricalism and formalist abstraction by demonstrating how Maslow and Gentry confronted changing reception in relation to that aesthetic transformation. In examining how Maslow and Gentry infused their work with gender critique, this chapter fuels this dissertation's subsequent chapter's focus on articulations of gender and sexuality in purportedly abstract dance as impacted by transnational politics.

Maslow's and Gentry's 1930s Leftist Dances

Maslow and Gentry took part in the leftist dance activism propelled by New Dance Group during the 1930s. While still a leading dancer in Martha Graham Dance Company, Maslow choreographed themes of transnational leftism and communism with New Dance Group. For example, her earliest solos *Themes from a Slavic People* (1934) and *Two Songs about Lenin* (1935) paid homage to Eastern European folk culture and to Vladimir Lenin and the Soviet Union, respectively. These pieces articulated her political alignments and the Marxist allegiance

of New Dance Group, an important influence in many of the dances that commented on socioeconomic issues produced under the Group's banner. She choreographed for *May Day March* in 1936 and commentary on the Spanish Civil War in 1938 with *Women of Spain*. Throughout her 1930s works, Maslow centered socialist or communist understandings of culture unbounded by national borders. With the onset of wartime mobilization and its calls for patriotic inclusion into the US, Maslow moved to a focus on Americanness with her *Dust Bowl Ballads* (1941), a suite of solos set to the music of Woody Guthrie in the plains of Oklahoma. Although *Dust Bowl Ballads* marked Maslow's transition to her 1940s Americana works, she did not abandon her previous political sympathies. In the solo, as in her later *Folksay* and *Champion*, she maintained focus on a socialist understanding of labor, belonging, and power. She used the capacious malleability of the Americana frame as a way to both fit with her contemporary aesthetic trends as well as to continue to advance her political critique.

Gentry also danced leftist critique during the 1930s. *Tenant of the Street* (1938), her most written-about solo, quickly became a fixture in New Dance Group's repertoire. In the work, she danced as an unhoused woman accompanied by street sounds in a score composed by Joseph Weber. *Tenant of the Street* demonstrated socialist realism's capacity to combat capitalism and social inequities. Gentry incorporated small moments of structured improvisation that added a sense of individual identity for her character. *Tenant of the Street* promoted expectations for Gentry as a leftist artist. Similar to Maslow, she veered towards Americana works as wartime mobilization intensified, but kept her leftist ethos. As Maslow and Gentry transformed their 1930s leftist dances into Americana works for the 1940s, they fit with broader debates among leftist dance and theatre artists of how to best present their convictions and how to do so in ways

beyond socialist realism. As Maslow and Gentry contended with how to articulate their political convictions in the context of wartime mobilization, they also articulated the impact of the Jewish assimilation into whiteness and its impact on racial and ethnic formations and relations.

The Americana frame proved an apt means into which Maslow and Gentry could adapt their 1930s leftist critique and take on emergent national and transnational concerns, especially racial formation. Before the 1930s, Jewish peoples had been considered outside of the borders of whiteness by dominant US culture. Beginning in 1933, though, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt promoted an "inclusive nationalism that embraced Jews and other immigrants" in order to increase support for his New Deal among minoritized subjects.[299] This rhetoric of unification under patriotism amplified during World War II as its stakes increased. Roosevelt's administration continued to assert an inclusive nationalism that worked to subdue domestic anti-Semitism and adversarial relationships among ethnic and racial groups, both of which threatened a national cohesion and support for the war effort.[300] These national efforts resulted in a gradual assimilation of Jews, as well as other European ethnic groups such as Italians and Irish, into whiteness throughout the mid-1930s into the war years. This effort worked in tandem with African Americans' Double Victory (Double V) Campaign, which linked issues of domestic racism with transnational fascism, to allow for a greater inclusion of African Americans in an imagined national body. However, African Americans did not gain the same privileges Jews did during this period. Jews were granted many privileges of whiteness post war through federal programs such as the GI Bill.[301] These programs were not equally implemented and often

---

[299] Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 189.
[300] Ibid.
[301] Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America*, 50.

excluded African Americans. In other words, the mid-1930s through mid-1940s held possibilities for a more inclusive definition of a national body, but federal steps towards inclusion were not universally materialized.

Maslow and Gentry performed demands for the kind of inclusive national body promoted by wartime mobilization. However, they carefully articulated the racial politics of that new national identity. Both women danced anti-racist visions of Americanness and combatted the forces that advanced Jewish social mobility through assimilation while widening a Black/white divide for racial relations in the US and in modern dance. An examination of Maslow's and Gentry's Americana dances reveals how the artists negotiated shifting definitions of ethnicity, race, and national identity while attempting to continue their leftist beliefs from the 1930s. Both women performed acts of critical imagination through which the Americanness of American modern dance could be re-embodied and permeate through national borders.

***

"I had a special feeling about America and the people in America": Feeling Nostalgic in Sophie Maslow's Disjunctive Americana Dances

Sophie Maslow choreographed contradiction in *Folksay* and *Champion*. At the height of wartime mobilization, *Folksay* presented a series of dances evoking rural Midwestern fields and a community of nonhomogeneous, yet cohesive bodies. Maslow's Graham training (she danced in Martha Graham Dance Company between 1931-1940) shone through in her choreography's reliance on virtuosic technique. An occasional evocation of square dance was paired with gingham and denim costumes designed by Edythe Gilfond, backdrops of painted fields, excerpts

from Carl Sandburg's poem about a democratic nation entitled *The People, Yes*, and Guthrie's renditions of US folk songs and phrases, or "folksay," to provide folksy sentiments of the Americana frame. Critics raved over *Folksay*, but consistently noted its inauthenticity. The piece pulled at the heartstrings of reviewers from disparate social locations, but their nostalgia for an imagined national body was qualified with the disjuncture posed between that vision and Maslow's modern dance. Despite this critique of *Folksay*'s inauthenticity, its nostalgia was powerful. It caused the piece to be so successful that New Dance Group, which provided the dance's cast, funded the creation of *Champion* six years later.

Anticipated to be a sequel of sorts to *Folksay* in its adherence to Americana themes, *Champion* adapted a short story by Ring Lardner of a troubled boxer who would stop at nothing to take down his opponents and rise to the top of his field. Choreographing at the beginning of the Cold War, Maslow infused the piece with her Jewish socialist sensibility and presented a take on the story that questioned the ethics and efficacy of the masculinist, imperialist stance of Lardner's protagonist. Although *Champion* did not receive nearly as much praise as *Folksay*, critics similarly noted its disjunctive qualities. Smooth, abstract modern dance led into clear representation of the piece's story. Actor and musician Tony Kraber's voice telling of a Champion's greatness as an American hero faded into scenes of the character's monstrous ways. The spoken story of an all-American hero clashed with scenes that physicalized his harm to women and persons with disabilities. Just as in *Folksay*, the purported story and the dance laid bare competing meanings that led to more questions than answers.

Previous scholarship on Maslow's Americana works focuses on *Folksay* and only occasionally mentions *Champion*. Dance scholars pick up on the contradictory Americanness of

Folksay noted by 1940s dance critics. Ellen Graff attends to the "idealized, homogenized space" of the piece.[302] She argues that "Maslow created a kind of revisionist account of American history."[303] Rebecca Rossen focuses on this revisionist aspect of the work. She notes that the work included Ashkenazi Jews and Pearl Primus when she explains that *Folksay* "depict[ed] an American collective that included ethnic and racial minorities."[304] For Naomi Jackson, considering the piece's life at the 92nd Street Young Men's-Young Women's Hebrew Association (92Y), the work demonstrated how Jews could use modern dance to "make space for themselves and other underrepresented members of society."[305] Josh Perelman takes a slightly different approach and argues that Maslow used the work to showcase "what it meant to be an American and a Jew at a tenuous moment in world history."[306] Although these scholars' accounts of the piece exhibit a range of ideas, they all agree that Maslow constructed a vision of US culture in *Folksay* that allowed for bodies not counted as white at that time.

I contribute to this conversation on *Folksay* by interrogating how Maslow choreographed a way for minoritized subjects to move as American. I depart from previous scholars' research on *Folksay* by underscoring the tension between sound and dance in the piece as well as its uses of nostalgia. An analysis of the many versions of *Folksay*'s script, a previously unanalyzed

---

302 Ellen Graff, *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 145.
303 Ibid., 139.
304 Rebecca Rossen, *Dancing Jewish: Jewish Identity in American Modern and Postmodern Dance* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 148. It must also be noted that in addition to Primus, African American dancer Donald McKayle performed in *Folksay* during the late 1940s.
305 Naomi M. Jackson, *Converging Movements: Modern Dance and Jewish Culture at the 92nd Street Y* (University Press of New England, 2000), 176.
306 Josh Perelman, "'I'm the Everybody Who's Nobody, I'm the Nobody Who's Everybody': How Sophie Maslow's Popular Front Choreography Helped Shape American Jewish Identity," in *Seeing Israeli and Jewish Dance*, ed. Judith Brin Ingber, Raphael Patai Series in Jewish Folklore and Anthropology (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 89.

material in discussions of the work, enables me to draw conclusions about the relationship between sound, dance, and in/authenticity in the piece. I also extend previous scholarship on Maslow's Americana choreography by attending to *Champion*. I probe how she continued and amended her interventions in the Americana frame with the onset of the Cold War. In the case of *Champion*, Maslow's disjunctive tactics continued in the contradictory relationship between the sounds of a narrated story, abstract dance, and movements that clearly represented Maslow's critique of US power. In the cases of both *Folksay* and *Champion*, her interracial casts and Jewish socialist ethos enable her to re-imagine and re-embody the Americana frame.

The relationship between sound and dance factored crucially in *Folksay* and *Champion*. My methodology for examining these works attends to "choreomusicality," which Daniel Callahan defines as "the relationship between music/score and dance/choreography."[307] I place Maslow's choreomusical theory of Americanness in conversation with Josh Kun's theorization of audiotopias. Kun defines audiotopias as "sonic spaces of effective utopian longings where several sites normally deemed incompatible are brought together."[308] He goes on to add that "the audiotopia is a musical space of difference, where contradictions and conflicts do not cancel each other out but coexist and live through each other."[309] My methodology builds upon Kun's audiotopia by adding the dimension of choreography. A choreo-audiotopia, or choreo-disaudiotopia in the case of *Champion*, accounts not only for an artist's planned movement, but also draws attention to corporeality in encounters that occur inside of the choreo-audiotopia.

---

[307] Daniel M. Callahan, "Accent, Choreomusicality, and Identity in Rodeo and 'Rōdē,ō," in *Futures of Dance Studies*, ed. Manning, Susan, Janice Ross, and Rebecca Schneider (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), 136.
[308] Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 23.
[309] Ibid.

In analyzing the relationship between sound and dance as well as the convergences of the zones of being those aspects represent in a given work, a choreo-audiotopia framework accounts for the ways in which sound cannot be contained by the dance it accompanies. In *Folksay*, Guthrie's singing represents a geographic and ethnic location of rural whiteness absent in Maslow's choreography. Sandburg's words on a democratic American people in open places such as the Grand Canyon work with the costumes and backdrop of *Folksay* to produce an imaginary rural US location for the piece. These sounds clash with the dance and also cause it to take on more interpretive possibilities. In *Champion*, recitation of a story about an all-American hero who achieved success by pulling himself up through hard work produces a vision of a fair US in which anyone can achieve acclaim through honest labor. This sonic imagery contrasts danced episodes of that hero's sordid personal life and the dangers of his power. Lynne Kendrick writes, aurality "is a mode of engagement that—because it cannot be captured by the eye—can exceed the boundaries by which our visible world is marked out for us."[310] A choreo-audiotopia framework is crucial for understanding Maslow's staging of contradictions in *Folksay* and *Champion* because it allows for the visual, oral, and aural to clash in a generative way without one collapsing into another.

In this chapter section, I analyze Maslow's uses of the Americana frame in *Folksay* and *Champion*. Drawing from a wealth of archival materials on *Folksay* and a modicum of fragments on *Champion*, I reconstruct these pieces and their reception in order to interrogate Maslow's interventions in the Americana frame and the ways in which her tactics changed from the war against fascism to the Cold War. *Folksay* left far more evidence behind than did *Champion*

---

[310] Lynne Kendrick, *Theatre Aurality* (London: Springer, 2017), xxii.

because, as a much more positively-received piece, it was performed at nearly every Dudley-Maslow-Bales trio performance during the 1940s. *Champion*, in contrast, was infrequently performed during 1948 through 1949 and very rarely performed after the turn of the decade. Critics did not devote much attention to the piece because of its lack of success in comparison to *Folksay*. Despite these evidentiary inconsistencies, the varying material traces of *Folksay*, *Champion*, and their reception demonstrate an overwhelming emphasis on nostalgia. Critical theory on nostalgia and enactments of national identity illuminates the nuances of Maslow's theory of Americanness and her manipulations of dominant notions of how one feels American. I argue that Maslow capitalized on question-inducing disjunctures in her Americana works and that these clashes enabled her to present a re-imagining and re-embodiment of national bodies.

Moving and Sounding American in *Folksay*

Maslow generated a choreo-audiotopia in *Folksay* that brought together disparate geographic locations (New York City and rural US) as well as their modes of generating artistic meaning (modern dance and folk songs or banter drawing from folk idioms) through the dancers' bodies. This, in turn, created a space in which she and her dancers could move as American. Although in her 1940s context, Maslow's intervention was awash in assimilation into whiteness and its problematics, it could not be considered a complete process of assimilation. The zones in the choreo-audiotopia did not meld but, rather, co-existed in a creative, and sometimes contradictory, tension. *Folksay* was not considered authentic by critics even though it evoked a nostalgia for a vision of Americana. In this way, Maslow's dancers moved as American without being fully assimilated into the particular definition of US national identity fostered by the soundscape and scenescape (white rural American).

Folksay marked important anomalies in Maslow's repertoire for a few reasons. First, it premiered at *Dance Observer's* first sponsored recital, demonstrating the anticipation modern dance critics held for rising choreographers of New Dance Group. Second, this recital also served as the premiere of Maslow's collaboration with fellow Graham dancer Jane Dudley and Humphrey-Weidman dancer William Bales in their Dudley-Maslow-Bales trio. Their work together as a trio would serve as their launching points for choreographic careers outside those of Graham or Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman. Finally, Maslow's tumultuous collaboration with Guthrie for *Folksay*, which will be discussed later, greatly influenced the work and underscored its entrapment in issues of (in)authenticity.

Sounding American, Dancing Modern

In its final scripted version, *Folksay* begins with Guthrie and Kraber's solemn recitation of Sandburg's poem: "The people is every man, everybody / Everybody is you and me and all others. / What everybody says is what we all say / And what is it we all say?"[311] After this invocation of a cohesive common people, the first of *Folksay*'s seven dances, entitled "Where You from, Stranger," begins. Three groups of three dancers walk in unison. Guthrie and Kraber pose questions of the incoming dancers: "Where you from, stranger? Where were you born? Got any money? What do you work at? Where's your passport? Who are your people?"[312] These lines imply non-homogeneity among the dancers that extends beyond national borders. However, the dancers' uniform steps suggest a mode of regulated belonging. The dancers interrupt every four steps with either a syncopated catch step, a small jump into a parallel ballet attitude, or a

---

[311] "Folksay Script," 1944, Merry-Go-Rounders Records Box 3, Folder 3, Merry-Go-Rounders Record Box, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
[312] Ibid.

turn. These variations enable the groups to break from the cohesion into which they are hailed through their walking choreography and incoming questions. This entrance serves as a metonym for the rest of *Folksay* in its clashes between quotidian walking and highly trained dance steps as well as between national homogeneity and difference.

Folksay continues in a disjunctive vein. Five women and four men move between different partnerships while executing quick footwork and small jumps with their torsos either held rigidly or in sharp Graham-like contractions. They travel in and out of group formations and throw in an occasional quasi-folkish step when they arrive in a new formation, such as swinging one leg out to the side and in with a flexed foot and fists on hips. Guthrie and Kraber's fast and repetitive guitar chords complement their contained vocal range and catchy phrasing when singing "The Dodger," a 1937 song criticizing a political candidate ahead of an election:

> "The candidate's a dodger, a well known dodger / the candidate's a dodger, I'm a dodger, too. / He'll slap you on the back and say he'll sign your note / But look out boys, he's dodging for your vote. / Oh, we're all dodging, dodging, dodging, dodging / We're all dodging on our way through the world."[313]

The distrust of politicians conveyed in the song contrasts the harmonious ensemble onstage. The music's chant-like sound with a melody that only travels one tone up or down from its beginning note does not match Maslow's virtuosic modern dance choreography. Despite the contradictions between sound and dance, the overall atmosphere of *Folksay*'s opening "Where You from, Stranger?" and "The Dodger" is one of a happy, rural, and distinctly political community.

---

[313] Ibid.

Maslow's choreography continues to move away from its sonic accompaniment in the following two dances. "Come on Superstition," a short dance for one man and three women set to lyrics about luck comes next. The dance is filled with balletic partnering and precise modern dance technique.[314] "On Top of Old Smokey" follows "Come on Superstition" and serves as a particularly important point in the show. "On Top of Old Smokey" was *Folksay*'s only solo and, perhaps because danced by Maslow herself, received the most critical attention of any part of the show.

Figure 1: Maslow in "On Top of Old Smokey" from *Folksay*, 1940s. 92Y Archives.

Maslow walks into "On Top of Old Smokey" slowly from offstage. Guthrie strums his guitar and sings: "On Top of Old Smokey / All covered with snow / I lost my true lover / From a-courtin' too slow."[315] Maslow reaches clasped hands overhead as she slowly maneuvers her torso in a circle, reaching to all directions of the space. Her torso harmonizes with the mountaintop of the song lyrics for a moment, but that cohesion is quickly discarded. Maslow

---

[314] "Ibid.
[315] Ibid.

begins a new choreographic phrase in which she sharply brushes her leg to the front and runs across the stage, forsaking her melancholy music (Figure 1). In an interview, she says that "On Top of Old Smokey" is "sad" and "nostalgic."[316] However, she does not physically represent the words of the song. Perhaps this rupture between music and dance is what led Edwin Denby of the *New York Herald Tribune* to characterize the dance as "fussy and unmusical."[317] Maslow appears more interested in showing off her dance ability than in pining over a lost lover conveyed in the song.

Maslow dances in a multitude of diagonal lines for her solo. She moves through the space in what dance writer and critic Margaret Lloyd characterizes as a "locomotor pattern," but the straightness of the diagonal is subverted by Maslow's twisting and turning body. She brings her audience to watch her display of mobility but their eyes cannot rest as she does not settle into a single direction.[318] She finally spins out of her solo in paddle turns that travel offstage. As a centerpiece of *Folksay,* "On Top of Old Smokey" captures the production's intractable ethos. Maslow dances in accordance with the piece's sounds, backdrop, and costumes for brief moments, but then moves away from them by focusing on dance technique.

Maslow's choreography in *Folksay*'s following dances continues to depart from the work's sonic and production elements. Guthrie's and Kraber's staged dialogue between dances maintains the piece's Americana ethos. "On Top of Old Smokey" is followed by "Aw Nuts" (also sometimes referred to as "Tough Guy Section"), a virtuosic jump-filled dance for two men and three women. This short section is followed by Guthrie and Kraber in carefully scripted

---

[316] Maslow, Sophie Maslow Interview.
[317] Edwin Denby, "The Modern Dance Two Kinds," *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*, January 28, 1945.
[318] *The New Dance Group Gala Historical Concert: Retrospective 1930s - 1970s* (Dancetime Publications, 1993).

banter about farming conditions. Next is a dance for one woman and one man to "Sweet Betsey from the Pike," a song about a sister and brother crossing mountains and attending social dances as they travel westward (Figure 2). The following dance, "I Ride an Old Paint," features three women and three men in highly technical modern dance technique. The simple guitar chords and Guthrie's contained melody singing of an arduous ride westward contrast the dancers' pirouettes, displays of flexibility, jumps traveling in circles, and refined technique. Although the piece's partnering sections enact heteronormative gendered relationships as the men support the women's balance, the women's execution of the same large jumps and turns as the men troubles gender binaries. Maslow's re-imagining of Americanness in "I Ride an Old Paint" sets up conventional gender roles and then deconstructs them.

Figure 2: Maslow and William Bales in "Sweet Betsey from the Pike" from *Folksay*, 1940s. Photographer: David Linton. John Martin Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Maslow's choreography for *Folksay* enacts not only her contemporary ethnic and racial reorganization, but also that of gender roles. This gendered critique is most poignant in "Hey You, Sun, Moon Stars" (also occasionally referred to as "Mother and Child"), a duet for two women set to recitation of poetry announcing a baby's birth to the natural world (Figure 3). The

women alternate throughout the duet between contained, careful movement and jubilant running or jumping. When one dancer moves with alacrity or great mobility, the other functions as her support by either physically supporting her through partnering or by executing slow and sustained movement in a different area of the stage as though providing support at a distance. The two women maintain a strong connection choreographically, but their gazes never meet. The dancers, instead, gaze beyond the corners of the stage, looking to an unseen horizon. Their movements do not represent the text of the poem, proclaiming a birth to the sun, moon, stars, hills, and animals. However, they meet the poem's slow cadence with a deliberate movement quality. George Beiswanger of *Dance Observer* notes about the piece, "towards the end of the dance, a rhythm has been set and the phrases of speech are fitted into this rhythm, not the other way around. The words become a fused, integrated part of the dance, just as a musical score composed on the dance."[319] Crucially, the dance controls the cadence of its accompanying spoken words as Maslow centers the female dancing body. This duet clarifies the labor of women as mothers and laborers in the workforce, as well as the necessity of women's support of one another. Maslow described the context for *Folksay*'s creation during the war as a time in which there was "an appreciation for women taking the part of men in the factories and all different walks of life."[320] Her re-imagining of Americanness underscores the multi-faceted nature of women's labor.

---

[319] George Beiswanger, "Lobby Notes and Jottings," *Dance Observer* 10, no. 4 (April 1943): 40.
[320] *The New Dance Group Gala Historical Concert.*

Figure 3: "Hey You, Sun, Moon, Stars" from *Folksay*, 1940s. John Martin Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Folksay concludes with a short finale in which all of the dancers walk in small groupings in diagonal and spiraling patterns across the stage. Words from various sections of Sandburg's poem *The People, Yes* are recited by Guthrie and Kraber. The chosen stanzas emphasize a futurity for "the people" and evoke imagery of open land with phrases such as "the people is a Grand Canyon of humanity."[321] As one group makes their way onstage, another emerges from the wings and joins them. The dancers break their long strides in unison as they jump in a ballet assemblé, bringing their feet together in the air, and then glide into a deep plié as one leg raises bent to the back in a parallel attitude. In contrast to the individualistic emphasis of previous sections, the finale's regimented quality elicits sentiments of bodies moving in strategic harmony. The overlapping groups create a sense of an inclusive and welcoming community as the words "the people will stick around a long time" sound.[322]

[321] "Folksay Script."
[322] Ibid.

Managing Dance, Sound, and Feeling in *Folksay*

The contradictions between sound and dance in *Folksay* were foundational throughout Maslow's creative process. Her collaboration with Guthrie was tumultuous due to her insistence on carefully measured perfection and his proclivity for improvisation. Rehearsals would erupt when Guthrie failed to reproduce songs as they sounded on records to which Maslow had choreographed the dances.[323] Guthrie's frustrations mounted, too, as he insisted that folk music was not meant to sound the same every time it was performed.[324] This clash between music and dance resulted in a decrease in Guthrie's lines in the show (and in a marriage between Maslow's dancer Marjorie Mazia and Guthrie after Maslow assigned Mazia to discipline him into conforming to Maslow's choreography).[325] An analysis of every version of *Folksay*'s script reveals Maslow's frustrations with Guthrie. Each new script version gave him fewer and fewer lines for recitation and song. Red slashes crossed out large sections of his banter. A conversation between Guthrie and Kraber in an early script was rhythmically counted out in sections as though bars of music. In the next script version, though, Maslow crossed out Guthrie's name and assigned his lines to Dudley. In the final version of the script, Guthrie received very few speaking lines and most of his song lyrics in the script contained notes in Maslow's writing on their rhythm counts. There was no room for improvisation in Maslow's vision of the Americana that *Folksay* would evoke.

Despite the tumult of his collaboration with Maslow, Guthrie's work on *Folksay* and growing relationship with Mazia inspired him to write an article entitled "Singing, Dancing, and

---

[323] Will Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 88.
[324] Woody Guthrie, "Singing, Dancing, and Team-Work," *Dance Observer* 10, no. 9 (November 1943): 104–5.
[325] Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical*, 89.

Team-Work" for *Dance Observer* in 1943. He began the article with a defense of why he should not have been required by Maslow to sing his song exactly alike every time. He then reflected: "I learned a good lesson here in team work, cooperation, and also in union organization. I saw why socialism is the only hope for us, because I was singing under the old rules of 'every man for his self' and the dancers was [sic] working according to a plan and a hope (I learned that a planned world is what you need)."[326] Guthrie saw the ensemble of dancers as a metaphor for socialism and choreography as standing for a socialist plan for the future. In the remainder of his article, he alternated between complements on Maslow's dancers and snide comments about her, for example, big feet or attempts to teach him how to play his music. Despite the apparent tension in Guthrie and Maslow's relationship, this article clarified the distinctly socialist ethos in Maslow's rehearsal room and in *Folksay*. As Guthrie learned from his work with her, Maslow saw socialism, particularly a Jewish socialism, as in need of choreography even if that choreography appeared to be in a discordant relationship with conventional notions of Americanness.

Maslow and Guthrie shared leftist and, at times, communist allegiances. His guitar emblazoned with a "this machine kills fascists" sticker neatly fit into *Folksay*. However, Maslow left no room for organic improvisation in her dance. Her re-imagining of Americanness, as the many script versions evidenced, required significant manipulation. She was acutely aware of the contrived nature of national affiliations, especially given her previous international leftist works. She knew how to mobilize that artificiality to the benefit of her cause, even if that meant a constant clash between Guthrie and herself or between dance and music. This resulted in very little overlap between sound and dance in *Folksay*. Sometimes the dancers paused and

---

[326] Guthrie, "Singing, Dancing, and Team-Work," 104.

acknowledged Guthrie or recited a line in his banter. Mostly, though, they stayed in their modern dance zone. When reviewing the piece for *Dance Observer*, Robert Sabin explained that "Folksay wandered far afield from the mood and implications of the textual background at times, but it had some passages of telling movement and pantomime in it."[327] Maslow's dancers only pantomimed during their brief non-dancing moments when they interacted with Guthrie. For Sabin, in other words, it was only when the dancers were not dancing that they conveyed the text of the music and poetry. Sound and dance did not mix in *Folksay*, but collided to generate a multifaceted Americanness.

Despite the mismatch between sound and dance, critics noted the theatrical power of *Folksay* to communicate a nostalgia for an ambiguous national identity. That nostalgia was not grounded in a factual account of history, but in the space for critical imagination part of the act of remembering. Maslow's nostalgia resonated with what Svetlana Boym has termed "reflective nostalgia," an act of "dwell[ing] in algia, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance."[328] The imperfections in memory hold possibility for critique as reflective nostalgia "is ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary."[329] This critical mode of nostalgia was utilized by leftists in the Popular Front. As Alastair Bonnett argues, modernity's leftists used nostalgia to guid[e] us back to authenticity, to solidarity, to the culture of the people."[330] However, when viewed in tandem with Boym's theorization of nostalgia, the definitions of "authenticity" and "people" were unstable. Maslow understood the mechanics of leftist nostalgia

---

[327] Robert Sabin, "Reviews of the Month: Jane Dudley, Sophie Maslow, William Bales," *Dance Observer* 9, no. 4 (April 1942): 47.
[328] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 41.
[329] Ibid., 50.
[330] Ibid., 7.

and also the artificiality of opaque national borders. She used nostalgia to refer to a carefully constructed embodiment of national identity that fit with both the national galvanization and transnational leftism of her wartime mobilization and Cultural Front alignments.

Critics understood Maslow's manipulation of nostalgia as the piece's way of achieving a mode of universality in the sense of melding diverse spectators into a cohesive national identity. For example, Doris Hering of *Dance Magazine* described *Folksay* as exhibiting an "intelligibility" and "heightened dramatic power" akin to "dance theatre."[331] In a later review, she went on to explain the effect that theatrical quality had on spectators:

> The audience settled back for a warm and pleasant interlude with a well-loved friend. We no longer think of *Folksay* in terms of art. It has entered that realm of experience known as universal—where warmth, humanity, and a sort of mellow wisdom are the ruling factors.[332]

Hering positioned the nostalgic warmth evoked in *Folksay* as a mechanism through which it could be interpreted as universal. Maslow's reflective, inconclusive nostalgia enabled spectators from various social locations to identify with it. Elena Maximova, also writing for *Dance Magazine*, expressed a similar view. She surmised that "Maslow is dancing the essence of the earthy, the soul of common, folksy people everywhere. Her striking quality as human being or artist is this flavoursome [sic] folksiness which cannot but touch the sympathetic chord in whatever person you happen to be."[333] For Maximova, sympathetic nostalgia operated as the

[331] Doris Hering, "While There Is Youth," *Dance Magazine*, January 1945, 10.
[332] Doris Hering, "The Moderns in Concert," *Dance Magazine*, February 1946, 44.
[333] Elena Maximovna, "Second Generation Modern," *Dance Magazine*, November 1942, 21, 32.

mode through which one could experience a familiar vision of common people. Nostalgia bound diverse spectators into a national body.

Folksay moved between contradictory zones of a choreo-audiotopia. If an audience member paid attention only to the dancers' torso contractions, high leg extensions, and energetic jumps, the piece belonged in the New York City modern dance scene filled with Jewish daughters of immigrants such as Maslow. If that audience member, instead, focused on Guthrie's music, the work portrayed a homogenous, though socialist, community in the rural Midwest. Finally, if the audience member considered the work's costumes and backdrop, it ought to be interpreted as representing a white rural US community. These elements came together in *Folksay* to produce a series of contradictions in place and positionality. Additionally, these disparate facets enabled Maslow to choreograph a nostalgia that mapped onto various spectators' experiences, assimilating them into her socialist imagining of Americanness. This nostalgia also elicited critics' interpretations of *Folksay* as inauthentic.

In emphasizing *Folksay*'s inauthenticity, critics clarified that the movement did not match its accompanying sounds. John Martin reported in the *New York Times* that "'Folksay' itself is certainly not…in any way conventionally folk. Miss Maslow, for all one may know, may not be familiar with a single square dance figure."[334] Despite the inauthenticity of Maslow's movement, he concluded his review by stating "Yet it adds up to a folk work. Its folk are of city as well as country, East as well as West; they have traits common to the American character all over the landscape, including its frank and disarming sentimentality."[335] For Martin, Maslow's work

---

[334] John Martin, "The Dance: Americana: Stability of the Native Art as Evidenced By Sophie Maslow's 'Folksay,'" *New York Times*, 1942.
[335] Ibid.

could be afforded a position of Americanness precisely because of the affect of patriotic nostalgia. That sentimentality enabled him to open the geographic demarcations around which bodies could be counted as American. Echoing Roosevelt's agenda for wartime mobilization, Martin used patriotism to include Maslow's work and dancers into a definition of US national identity. Similarly, a *Dance Observer* review indicated that *Folksay* was modern dance layered against folk music and culture. It explained that the work "indicated that modern dance can shake the American past, and even from what would at first sight appear to be artistically formidable, such as out-of-date slang, evoke from it the live humor and vigor, the pathos and faith of American experience."[336] This critic understood modern dance as disparate from the folk idioms used in the sounds of Guthrie's music and Sandburg's poetry. That modern dance, though, enabled the affective response of nostalgia. In this *Dance Observer* review modern dance both collided with and acted upon notions of American folk.

Although critics asserted that Maslow's choreography was not folk, they indicated that there was an intentionality to it. Lloyd explained that Maslow "makes no attempt to be authentic in step or costume, but uses the material creatively."[337] However, she also reported that "the whole is simple and heart-warming and endearing."[338] For Lloyd, Maslow evoked a "heart-warming" affect without adhering to what might be considered an "authentic" American folk practice. Similarly, Hilda Koenigsberg noted in *The Y Bulletin* that "the dance sometimes wandered a bit from the implication of the text," but was "heartwarming."[339] For Koenigsberg

---

[336] Harriet Johnson, "Dudley-Maslow-Bales Trio and New Dance Group," *Dance Observer* 16, no. 3 (March 1949): 39. Johnson's evocation of a single American faith is notable considering that Sandburg was Unitarian, Maslow was Jewish, and Guthrie did not embrace any religion.
[337] Margaret Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance.* (Brooklyn: Knopf, 1949), 184.
[338] Ibid., 183.
[339] Hilda Koenigsberg, "In the Key of K," *The "Y" Bulletin*, March 19, 1943.

and Lloyd, the heart-warming and nostalgic affect of *Folksay* did not come from a melding of sound and dance. Rather, the contradiction between them created this impact. All of these critics conveyed that the work was American, but not quite. That not-quiteness, or the generative collisions and contradictions of the choreo-audiotopia, provoked nostalgia in critics. This nostalgia made definitions of Americanness ambiguous and porous.

Although *Folksay* operated as a choreo-audiotopia in which disparate zones of being, moving, and sounding collided but did not meld into one another, its socialist, communitarian ethos resonated with nostalgic longings for national identity during the height of wartime mobilization and its assimilative implications for Jews. When viewing the piece during wartime mobilization's advancement of inclusion, it created a sense of a unified American national identity for some spectators. For example, Vivian Shapiro, an Ashkenazi Jewish member of 92Y and dance critic for its member bulletin, wrote that Maslow "has dipped into the overflowing material of our vast cultural heritage and created dances to…Carl Sandburg's poetic inspiration; and out of this she has evolved something so exciting and solid that it is without wonder that this reviewer could see those dances a dozen times and still come out cheering!"[340] Shapiro interpreted a use of the traditions of an Ashkenazi Jewish "our" and a commensurability between that and American folk idioms. Although Maslow did not include explicitly Jewish content in *Folksay*, Shapiro's interpretation was not wrong according to Maslow's conception of the piece. Maslow remarked that she saw a resemblance between the work of Shalom Aleichm, who wrote about Eastern European Jewish shtetl life, and Guthrie.[341] Shapiro understood Maslow as

[340] Vivian Shapiro, "Dance Recital Lauded Dudley, Maslow, and Bales Feature Americana Performance," *The "Y" Bulletin*, May 8, 1942, 2.
[341] Deborah Jowitt et al., "Breaking Ground," https://92yondemand.org/breaking-ground-deborah-jowitt-naomi-jackson-carmen-de-lavallade.

layering Ashkenazi Jewish heritage on top of poetry about a democratic American people. During the war, anti-Semitism had not vanished but modes of combatting it had changed. Rather than appeal to a separatist rhetoric of racial difference, Jews condemned anti-Semitism in the name of Americanism and democracy.[342] Notions of Americanness functioned for Jews as both a means of protection and as a place from which critique could be made. For Shapiro, Jewishness met with Americanness in *Folksay*, but one did not erase the other. They collided in such a way that provoked an affective state of excitement and nostalgia for Ashkenazi Jewish traditions. Although Maslow choreographed a socialist and non-assimilative ethos for the piece, her Cultural Front appeals to common people rendered enactments of assimilation difficult to avoid in *Folksay*.

Maslow mobilized notions of American folk culture, however artificially constructed, to serve a political purpose. She remarked in 1976 about *Folksay*: "It was at the time of World War II and people discovered each other as human beings. There was an interest in the 'common man,' and the value of the human being."[343] Dudley described this period by stating that she and Maslow were "moving in circles that were very political" and that they used "American folk material because it was a vehicle which had integrity…and in which there would be some kind of social message spoken in what we felt was an artistic and viable way."[344] Maslow's sentiment of honoring common folks aligned her with the Cultural Front allegiance of New Dance Group. She explicated her alignment with the Popular Front umbrella of the Cultural Front in an interview with Hering for *Dance Magazine*:

---

[342] Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, 202.
[343] Maslow, Sophie Maslow Interview.
[344] Jane Dudley and William Bales, Interview with William Bales and Jane Dudley, March 7, 1977, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

> We're popular, if by 'popular' you mean 'of the people.' But this is the Age of the Common Man, and it is the common people who are the backbone and the strength and hope of our civilization and our culture. We, as artists, and above all, as thinking people, are touched because they are our own problems. We are constantly aware of our relationship to him. In our dancing we try to express a common emotional experience. If we succeed, then we have helped make the modern dance healthier and more vital as an art form.[345]

Maslow began this statement by placing herself within typical rhetoric of the Cultural Front with her invocation of the "Common Man." She then positioned dance as able to mediate in the struggles of that commoner, blending Roosevelt's rhetoric of a unified country engaged in mutual aid with that of the Cultural Front. Finally, she indicated that modern dance would benefit from presenting a form of universalism grounded on quotidian folks. Reviews of *Folksay* indicated that critics engaged in a modicum of universalization in their responses that the work was representative of a cohesive American national identity despite its inauthenticity. The contradiction between sound and modern dance, however, disallowed a fuller universalization or assimilative process to take place in critics' receptions of the piece. Whereas Maslow saw modern dance as a vehicle to render the "Common Man" as universally represented, critics saw her choreography as ambiguous and unrelated to the particular peoples that *Folksay*'s soundscape conveyed.

Despite *Folksay*'s inexactness, its choreo-audiotopia was premised on the logic of the Cultural Front, with its prioritization of common people as well as steeped in Roosevelt's call for

---

[345] Doris Hering, "Dudley-Maslow-Bales," *Dance Magazine*, May 1946, 17.

a unified US that included minoritized subjects in the face of the war. In this way, Maslow's choreo-audiotopia worked as a recognizable representation of Americanness for critics even while her modern dance choreography muddled that recognizability and elicited a nostalgia for an ambiguous America. Her Jewish and occasional African American dancers moved as American in the work as they were perceived by critics in relation to non-dance zones of the choreo-audiotopia. However, critics' insistence that their movement was inauthentic demonstrated that the dancers were not necessarily assimilated into Americanness. The choreo-audiotopia created a clash in zones of being that allowed the dancers' bodies to move between those zones.

Sounding American and Moving in Critique of US American Power in *Champion*

New Dance Group sought to build upon the success of *Folksay* when they financed Maslow's *Champion* in 1948. Although she had choreographed several pieces between 1942 and 1948 none came close to the tremendous popularity of *Folksay*. With the support of New Dance Group and an interracial cast of their most popular dancers, Maslow crafted an adaptation of Lardner's short story about a villainous boxer, called "The Champion," who stops at nothing on his road to success. Accompanied by jazz music composed by Samuel Maltowsky, who served as Music Director for many theatre and musical productions, *Champion* showcased two narrative threads. First, it told of a US boxer who worked hard and succeeded in his sport. This story was recited by a sports broadcaster character called "Announcer" performed by Kraber. This narrative thread also came through in Maltowsky's jazz and blues music with Maslow's choreographic notes carefully detailing parts for each instrument to achieve a light and energetic sound. Second, and more importantly, *Champion* warned of the danger of power held by a single

man. This message was especially poignant in its context of postwar US neo-imperialism. The devastation World War II brought to European and Asian cities enabled the US to take on a new role as a global superpower. US modern dance took part in that new assignation by positioning New York as the world's artistic capital; modern dance premised on US aesthetics as universal; and the new genre of ethnic dance staged in US venues as evidence of the power of dance to represent global connections and harmony so long as it adhered to US neo-imperial desires.[346] Maslow's *Champion* departed from these trends in significant ways by staging a lesson on the danger of American heroes and, more so, in bestowing power in said heroes. She did so by following similar tactics to those she used in *Folksay*, especially the disjuncture between sound and dance.

Maslow's strategies for *Folksay and Champion* greatly overlapped. Similar to *Folksay*, *Champion* used an interracial cast. In many of its performances, it staged an interracial marriage with Donald McKayle performing as the "Manager" character and Maslow as his wife. *Champion* picked up on *Folksay*'s socialism by imagining a socialist, ethnically and racially diverse US in which the evils of those who sought to be omni-powerful would be thwarted. As *Folksay* contained commentary on the productive power of women, *Champion* demonstrated gender critique as the villainous Champion treated women poorly. Also similar to *Folksay*, Maslow relied on a choreographic strategy of, what Boym might term, reflective, disjunctive nostalgia that allowed room for questioning the inconsistencies and ironies part of nostalgic longings.[347] Spectators heard musical phrases repeated while hearing Announcer recite

---

[346] For more on this shift in US power and the roles of modern dance and ethnic dance in that shift, see Rebekah J. Kowal, *Dancing the World Smaller: Staging Globalism in Mid-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
[347] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

conventional stories of a man pulling himself up by his bootstraps in order to become the pride of his nation. As in *Folksay*, these sonic elements sharply contrasted with the work's movement. Whether in physicalizations of the story through non-modern dance movement or in highly technical modern dance phrases, Maslow choreographed an irony that critics consistently noted. This contrast raised questions about the incompatibility of fighting and power with a socialist society. Despite these similarities to *Folksay* and its financial backing by New Dance Group, *Champion* did not meet success. In this chapter section, I trace *Champion*'s choreography and reception in order to ascertain why its re-imagining and re-embodiment of American bodies failed in comparison to *Folksay*. I argue that it did so due to its incompatibility with its Cold War context.

In 1948, Maslow's theatrical reliance on representation or narrative was quickly growing obsolete with the rise of formalist abstraction. At the same time, her leftist or communist impulses became a liability with the end of the war against fascism and the beginning of the Cold War. Critics' interpretations of her radicalism shifted over the 1940s. Whereas in the beginning of the decade, Guthrie's assertion of the socialism in *Folksay* won a featured article in *Dance Observer*, in 1949 Lloyd declared that the radicality of Maslow and her New Dance Group colleagues manifested in their allegiance to common people and use of interracial casting.[348] When describing Maslow's dances with a focus on *Folksay* and *Champion*, Lloyd carefully balanced an admission of Maslow's leftist critique with an accommodation to tenets of Cold War modern dance. She allowed that the two works included "some sarcasm, an occasional sneer."[349]

---

[348] Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*, 174, 186.
[349] Ibid., 186.

She countered that by arguing that in Maslow's work "there is no popping of propaganda. She does not argue about racial prejudice. She makes a song of racial sympathy."[350] Taken in tandem with Lloyd's assertion that "there are no more reds in modern dance," these comments revealed the Cold War conundrum of *Champion*.[351] For Lloyd, its interventions in racial discrimination through McKayle's leading role could be considered, but only when characterized as distinctly not protest and, therefore, in accordance with Cold War cultural commentators' desire to mute US racial unrest in fear of a Soviet takeover. *Champion* hung onto the 1940s' earlier allowances for overt displays of socialism through theatrical choreography. This caused an incommensurability between its narrative and the demands of formalist abstraction during the Cold War.

Sounding like a Hero, Dancing like a Villain

[350] Ibid., 184.
[351] Ibid., 173.

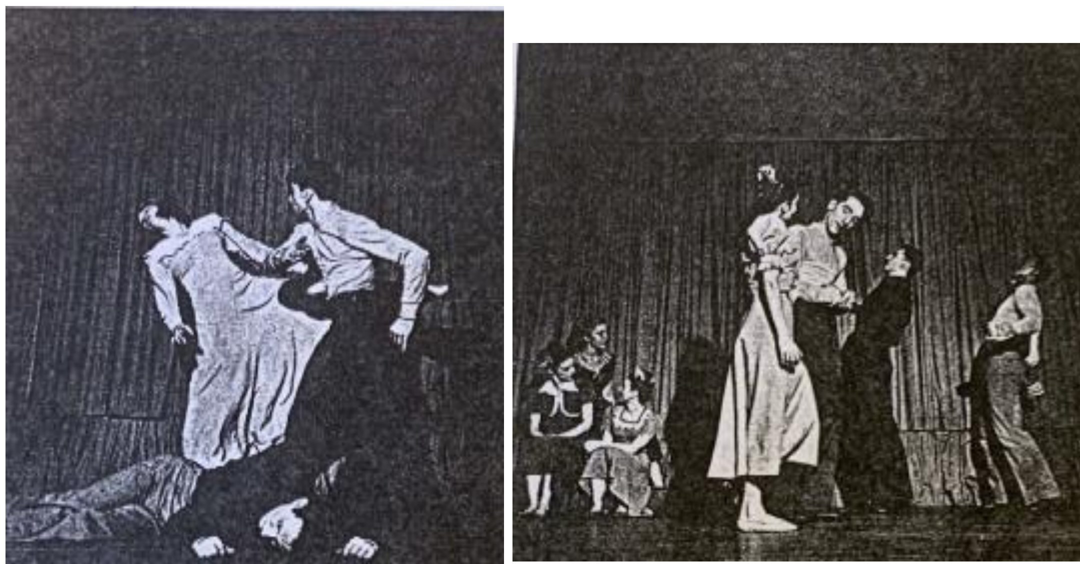


Figure 4 (left): Champion (William Bales) pushes down his mother (Jane Dudley) after knocking down and stealing the money of his crippled brother (Normand Maxon). *Life Magazine* clipping, undated. Photographer: Phillipe Halsman. Sophie Maslow Research Materials, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Figure 5 (right): Champion (Bales) attempts to seduce The Girl He Marries (Caiserman). *Life* Magazine clipping, undated. Photographer: Phillipe Halsman. Sophie Maslow Research Materials, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Champion takes place over a series of flashback episodes. Kraber narrates the story of Champion, a "clean-cut American hero" as he enters into a championship boxing match.[352] The sound of Kraber's voice cuts out to dance scenes depicting Champion's "sordid personal life."[353] In "Round One: The Knock-out," Champion slaps his mother to the ground when she protests after he steals money from his disabled brother (Figure 4). Champion flips a stolen coin and a score for clarinet, flute, trumpet, violin, viola, percussion, cello, and bass repeats, indicating the continual repetition of Champion's bad behavior.[354] "Round Two: The Gym" surrounds "the first

[352] "The Champion," *Life Magazine*, n.d., Sophie Maslow Research Materials, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
[353] Ibid.
[354] Sophie Maslow, "Choreography Notes-Champion," n.d., Sophie Maslow Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

victim of the Champion's unchivalrous love life" as Champion pursues a young woman called "The Girl He Marries" while "The Boxers" and "The Spectators" watch (Figure 5).[355] Although Champion's "intentions are dishonorable," his "Manager" intervenes and forces him to marry the young woman. Photographs of the scene display The Spectators as a group of women who watch Champion in awe. When he chooses The Girl He Marries out of their group, The Spectators talk amongst themselves, acknowledging their friend's new romance with the purported all-American hero. When not boxing or beaten to the ground, The Boxers dance to Matlowsky's syncopated jazz rhythm as it repeats previously played parts of the score.[356] Before Champion attempts to seduce The Girl He Marries, The Boxers dance with their arms and legs in angular shapes reflecting an Africanist aesthetic in juxtaposition to rigidly held torsos. As Champion and The Girl He Marries interact with one another and then marry, The Boxers exhibit Graham technique in high releases of their upper torsos. Maslow brings some Africanist movement idioms into her standard use of Graham technique for The Boxers. This choreographic choice stands as an anomaly in Maslow's repertoire, but resonates with her way of sprinkling square dance-like steps into her Graham-based movement vocabulary in *Folksay*. In both cases, brief durations of movement that match what might be expected from the music's cultural context provide a site from which the work's disjuncture between dance and music or dance and recited narrative can be identified.

---

[355] "The Champion."
[356] Maslow, "Choreography Notes-Champion."

Figure 6: The Girl He Marries (Caiserman) attempts to win Champion's (Bales) affection only to face his abuse. *Life Magazine* clipping, undated. Photographer: Phillipe Halsman. Sophie Maslow Research Materials, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Figure 7: The Girl He Marries (Caiserman) begs Champion (Bales) to take her on his exhibition tour and not pursue Manager's Wife. *Life Magazine* clipping, undated. Photographer: Phillipe Halsman. Sophie Maslow Research Materials, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

The second half of *Champion* turns its attention to the impact of Champion's behavior on women. In "Round Three: The Exhibition Tour," Champion grows bored of The Girl He Marries. She tries to win his affection only to face abuse and then indifference (Figure 6).[357] He leaves her at home when he departs for an exhibition tour and pursues "Manager's Wife." In the final "Round Four: The Night Spot," Champion and Manager's Wife fall in love despite pleas from The Girl He Marries and Manager (Figure 7). The music shifts as a trumpet and percussions begin to play a foxtrot.[358] Champion and Manager's Wife match a new tango score by dancing tango mixed with modern dance (Figure 8). The show concludes with no resolution and no sympathy for Champion. The All-American hero who seeks power, money, and to conquer boxing opponents, his disabled brother, and women proves to be the ultimate "anti-

[357] "The Champion."
[358] Ibid.

hero."[359] Or, as *Theatre Arts Magazine* summarizes when comparing the work to *Folksay*, *Champion* "is also all-American; but it is of an all-American heel, and consequently of a less wholesome fibre [sic] than its predecessor."[360] Whereas *Folksay* proclaims the socialist possibilities of Americanness, *Champion* warns of the nation's danger when it strays too far from those socialist principles.

Figure 8: Champion (Bales) and Manager's Wife (Sophie Maslow) choose to leave their partners for one another. *Life Magazine* clipping, undated. Photographer: Phillipe Halsman. Sophie Maslow Research Materials, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

An Unambiguous Anti-Imperialist Americanness

Champion held little of the ambiguity of *Folksay*. Critics remarked negatively on its overt use of narrative representation as well as the disjuncture between the story spoken by Kraber and the danced episodes. Martin reviewed *Champion* multiple times and, in each case, expressed his disappointment in it because of both its story and mode of storytelling. In one instance, he argued

---

[359] Donald McKayle, *Transcending Boundaries: My Dancing Life* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 33.
[360] Beatrice Gotlieb, "Making of an Institution," *Theatre Arts Magazine*, February 1952, Sophie Maslow Research Materials, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

that *Champion*'s subject matter rendered it "less significant" than *Folksay*.[361] Maslow's ambiguous nostalgia in *Folksay* enabled interpretations of a special American quality and a universalism, both of which fit with the needs of national politics vis-à-vis modern dance in the beginning of the Cold War. *Champion*, though, offered no possible interpretations of American greatness or universalism. It directly critiqued national power as embodied by Champion. In another review of the work, Martin offered a summary that represented that of many of the dance's critics. He remarked:

> [*Champion*] is strictly narrative in form and sometimes becomes so literal as almost to demand dialogue. Its content is negative—the story of a noble prize-fighter who is shown up ironically as a complete scoundrel. Its choreographic values vary significantly; it is imaginative and formally interesting chiefly in the two boxing sequences, but in its more dramatic sequences it relies on fairly obvious dumb-show. Though it is manifestly the work of a craftsman and a stylist, it is something of a letdown from the creator of the universal, the evocative "Folksay."[362]

In the boxing scenes Martin mentioned as *Champion*'s redeeming moments, Maslow mixed modern dance, boxing movement, and a modicum of Africanist aesthetics to create the most ambiguous moments of the work.[363] In addition to the lack of spoken narrative in these sections, the boxing movements rendered the choreography more abstract than if it had been comprised

---

[361] John Martin, "Dance Fete Offers Four Group Works: Jane Dudley, Sophie Maslow, William Bales Seen with Unit at New London Matinee," *New York Times*, 1948.
[362] John Martin, "The Dance: Surfeit: An Overgenerous Festival by New Dance Group," *New York Times*, June 6, 1948.
[363] McKayle, *Transcending Boundaries*, 33-34. McKayle took boxing and Greek wrestling lessons on his own in order to perfect the dance required in these sections.

only of, for example, Graham technique. For Martin, these moments could not overcome the clear narrative representation and lack of universalism in the rest of the show. Clare Croft has explained how the US attempted to export its dance aesthetics abroad under the guise of that dance as universal during the Cold War.[364] Martin carried out such a process in this review by defining *Folksay* with its rural, white, Midwestern US particularities as universal. *Champion* did not fit into that process.

It would seem from Martin's review that *Champion* included a significant amount of pantomime, but that was not the case. *Life Magazine* published a photospread that captured every key moment from the work. None included pantomime. Maslow's choreographic notes did not reference pantomime or acting. A *Dance Observer* review defined *Champion* as a "very dramatic dance play" and then qualified that by noting "very wisely there is no miming and posturing, and a conscious and necessary unity was given by the device of the radio announcer's intermittent soliloquy."[365] When writing for *Dance Magazine*, Hering located *Champion*'s narrative representation in its sounds, rather than in its movement. She defined the piece as "the work of a realist," due largely to Matlowsky's score "set in popular dance rhythms and picturesque percussion [that] captures the restlessness and reality."[366] Similarly, critic Frances Herridge described that Maslow "uses remarkably few stereotyped gestures even though dealing with commonplace action. Her fighting scenes and her ballroom dance scenes are put into dance pattern without looking effete or routine."[367] As another critic wrote, the story of *Champion* "is

[364] Clare Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
[365] Johnson, "Dudley-Maslow-Bales Trio and New Dance Group," 38.
[366] Doris Hering, "The Season in Review," *Dance Magazine*, July 1948, 9-10.
[367] Frances Herridge, "Ballet of Prize Ring Pulls No Punches," n.d., Sophie Maslow Papers Clipping, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

reported via loudspeaker. It doesn't come off too effectively, lacking the integration to give it stability and the originality to give it substance."[368] The lack of pantomime or stereotyped movement noted by these critics spoke to the disjuncture between sound and dance in *Champion*. Maslow choreographed two narratives in the work—one told by Kraber and the music and the other presented by the dancers. These did not mix, but created an inconclusive site from which audiences could feel a fond nostalgia for national heroes by listening to Kraber and the musicians or a contempt for the very notion of a powerful all-American hero by watching the dancers. In *Champion*'s Cold War climate, the former narrative gained more traction with critics than the latter, but was ultimately unable to overcome the latter narrative's incompatibility with Cold War aesthetics.

Maslow continued her Jewish socialist aesthetic and its, increasingly outmoded, Cultural Front alignment in *Champion*. That stance's devotion to common people manifested in the work's villainization of Champion as he gained more power and abused those around him as well as in the piece's interracial cast. In the early postwar period, this reverence to common people and contempt for a powerful man purported to be a hero took on additional tenors for Jews and women. Whereas Jewish assimilation into whiteness could have subdued those Jews' suspicions of federal authority, *Champion* ignited a warning of US power even when it operated under a heroic guise. This time period also witnessed a reorganization of women in the labor force as men returned from war and took many of the jobs that had been filled by women during

---

[368] Miles Kastendick, "Dance Group Fresh, Skillful," n.d., Sophie Maslow Research Materials Clipping, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

the war years. In *Champion*, US power as embodied by Champion neglected and assaulted women.

When allowing for social commentary in *Champion*, Lloyd situated it within a discussion of Maslow's work as part of a "radical American modern dance" that was "interracial from its start."[369] With generalized character names, such as Manager, Champion, or The Girl He Marries, Maslow left room for spectators' interpretations of the characters' ethnicity and race, especially when considering the interracial makeup of New Dance Group. The fact that Lloyd referenced *Champion* in a discussion of Maslow's interracial casts and efforts against racial oppression indicated that meanings surrounding race manifested in the piece. After the first several performances of *Champion*, McKayle replaced Ryder as the Manager married to Maslow's character, Manager's Wife. Interestingly, critics did not comment upon this staging of an interracial marriage as they had done for the interracial cast of *Folksay* or for Maslow's later *The Village I Knew*, a piece about an Eastern European Jewish shtetl. Whether dancing as Boxer in early productions of *Champion* or as Manager in later performances, McKayle's body and characters functioned as foils to Champion's villainous ways. When Boxer, McKayle's character trained to become a star athlete through physical practice with a group of teammates. This communal practice contrasted Champion who acted alone in his knockouts of opponents, women, and his disabled brother. As Manager, McKayle earnestly tried to save Champion from himself by persuading him to marry The Girl He Marries and stop his womanizing ways in the process. Of course, that plan went awry when Champion abused and neglected The Girl He

[369] Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*, 186.

Marries only to seduce and run away with Manager's Wife. Maslow, performing as Manager's Wife, abandoned McKayle/Manager for the devious power of Champion.

When McKayle performed as Manager, Maslow's depiction of Manager's Wife abandoning him for Champion took on resonances beyond romantic betrayal in the immediate postwar years. As Jews gained access to institutional privileges of whiteness, alignment with African Americans, such as that implicitly promoted in the Double Victory (Double V) campaign, waned and the color line dividing the two groups grew. Maslow's Jewish female body playing Manager's Wife began *Champion* in close alignment with Manager, an African American man when played by McKayle.[370] She, however, could not resist the powerful Champion's allure. Manager and Manager's Wife's interracial marriage dissolved in the face of violent power. Throughout the work, the dancer's movements juxtaposed with the piece's oral narrative in such a way that commented upon the dangers of US neo-imperialism. The work also did so in ways that specifically warned against losing the recent socioeconomic gains made by Jews and women, as well as those made by interracial solidarity efforts popular among communist sympathizers. Champion's power, and the strength of US neo-imperialism, needed to be circumvented in order to protect minoritized subjects. Whereas *Folksay* enacted a choreo-audiotopia, *Champion* performed an ominous choreo-disaudiotopia.

Even as the Americana frame and folksy Americana aesthetics grew obsolete at the end of the 1940s, critics consistently praised *Folksay* as a counterpoint to *Champion*'s failings. As US modern dance moved towards formalist abstraction's allowance for universalism, *Folksay*

---

[370] Those who followed Maslow and her work would have known of her ethnicity through her frequent commentary on it in interviews.

possessed enough ambiguity through its rural Midwest/modern dance mismatch to roughly fit part of those aesthetic imperatives. *Champion*, in contrast, could not be explained away as universal. In fact, it directly countered US ambitions to become a global superpower in the wake of World War II's devastation of Europe and Asia. When critics praised *Champion*, they did so for its moments of abstract modern dance choreography apart from Kraber's narration. Although the work contained no pantomime, its meanings were obvious enough that critics characterized it as too theatrically realistic. *Champion* did not fail in the eyes of critics only because of its lack of abstraction, it did so because of its abundance of clarity in its critique of US power. Through Kraber's narration, *Champion* evoked a nostalgia for a vision of Americana in which people could pull themselves up to success through hard work and dedication. The work then ruptured that nostalgia through choreography that warned against the falsity of that narrative and the dangers in placing too much power in a single person or nation. Additionally, the work's care for women, disabled persons, and minoritized ethnicities and races instructed on the need for those groups and their allies to continue to demand socioeconomic gains and not fall into complacency after the war. Maslow continued her use of disjunctive sounds and dance as well as Jewish socialist aesthetic from *Folksay* into *Champion*. However, *Champion*'s discordance with its Cold War cultural context resulted in poor critical reception and a short run in Maslow's repertoire.

Re-Embodying Americanness through a Clash between Sound and Dance

When interrogating how *Folksay* and *Champion* mobilized the Americana frame, it is necessary to consider the pieces' messiness despite their expertly executed modern dance. In *Folksay*, the tension between the dancers' precise modern dance and their casual movement when they bantered with Guthrie between dances, as well as the strain between the work's

modern dance and its soundscape and costumes, created a choreo-audiotopia with an ambiguous space for interpretation. Reviews of *Folksay* were most bound together by critics' experiences of the work's inauthentic, sentimental, and hopeful Americanness. In *Folksay*, Maslow produced an affect of nostalgia for spectators that equipped them to retrieve a vision of a positively remembered past, use that to situate themselves in relation to the rural America proclaimed in Sandburg's poetry and Guthrie's music, and then imagine a future of unified belonging. In *Champion*, the dancers' abstract modern dance infused with boxing and Africanist movement sharply juxtaposed Kraber's clear narrative. Similarly, danced scenes depicting Champion's dark ways contrasted with the sounds of a story about an all-American boxer who got ahead through hard work. The strain between *Champion*'s nostalgic aural story and its ominous embodied counterpart generated a choreo-disaudiotopia with little space for interpretation beyond the meanings presented by Maslow. In both *Folksay* and *Champion*, sound and dance clashed into a disjunctive, reflective nostalgia.

The disjuncture between sound and dance in *Folksay* and *Champion* created a surplus in meaning that could not be contained by conventional embodiments of American national identity. *Folksay*'s nostalgia premised on a Jewish socialist critique of homogenous Americanness vis-à-vis contradictions in sound and dance contained the irony and inconclusive nature of Boym's reflective nostalgia. *Champion*'s evaluation of US empire danced against the background of narration of an all-American hero's rise to greatness also resulted in an inconclusive definition of Americanness. For *Folksay*, critics could imagine an open and universal national identity aided by wartime mobilization. In the case of *Champion*, critics overwhelmingly refused to question the Americanness presented onstage due to its inconsistency

with Cold War aesthetic imperatives. In her Americana dances, I argue, Maslow used clashes between sound and dance to mobilize and subvert dominant understandings of Americana in order to re-embody American bodies.

***

Satirizing National Bodies: Eve Gentry's Americana Dances

Eve Gentry refused metaphorical uses of dance or place. In Americana dances of Sophie Maslow or Martha Graham, the Midwestern or Western US functioned as an imagined, somewhat mythical place of possibility. Gentry grew up as Henrietta Greenhood in an Eastern European Jewish immigrant household in then-rural San Bernardino, California. She traveled as a young adult across the country by car in order to come to New York for her dance career as a member of Hanya Holm's company and then as an independent choreographer, member of New Dance Group, co-founder of the Dance Notation Bureau, as well as a leader in Pilates. The West of her experience was a material place distinct from representations of it on the modern dance, ballet, or Broadway stages. In her deployments of the Americana frame, she built upon and/or critiqued existing uses of it.

Gentry innovated three distinct Americana dance modes. First, she choreographed blues pieces performed often for the USO stage that evoked a loneliness and female resilience during the war. These resonated with Pearl Primus's dances about loneliness and loss during World War II. Next, she crafted satirical solos about the West in relation to previous dance imaginings of it. Gentry turned attention to common people of the West in line with some aspects of Maslow's work and the Cultural Front. Finally, Gentry made protest dances against racial injustice, especially lynching. In so doing, she built on the precedent of Primus's *Strange Fruit* to stage a

scathing critique of Southern white womanhood. In all of these dances, I argue, Gentry shifted established conventions for presenting or critiquing American bodies. She did so by demanding a demetaphorized vision of those bodies and the places in which they were situated.

In this chapter section, I examine Gentry's uses of the Americana frame. I interrogate how her choreographic and political tactics manifested on the modern dance stage and functioned in conversation with Americana representations of other stages. My method follows Gentry's dances according to category: themes surrounding women during World War II; those of the Western US; and protest against racial injustice. This order is significant in that it was one of Gentry's 1942 USO performances of dances on themes of women during World War II that led her to change her name to Eve Gentry. This experience, as will be discussed later, greatly colored her time on the USO circuit and, I suggest, an understanding of the powers of the female body onstage in her later works. I place these dances in conversation with similar pieces by Gentry's contemporaries as well as theories of nostalgia resonant with the modes of Americana evoked in her interventions.

In contrast to the case of Maslow's works, for which much material evidence remains and it is nearly possible to reconstruct *Folksay* and *Champion* step-for-step, very few material traces remain of Gentry's choreographic career during the 1940s. Much existing scholarship focuses on her relationship to Holm and Mary Wigman or on her 1938 solo *Tenant of the Street*, a piece about an impoverished, unhoused woman.[371] Mary Anne Santos Newhall's Master's Thesis

---

[371] Eve Gentry, "The 'Original' Hanya Holm Company," *Choreography and Dance* 2, no. 2 (1992): 7–39; Mary Anne Santos Newhall, "Uniform Bodies: Mass Movement and Modern Totalitarianism," *Dance Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (ed 2002): 27–50; *The New Dance Group Gala Historical Concert: Retrospective 1930s - 1970s* (Dancetime Publications, 1993); John Ittelson et al., *Hanya: Portrait of a Dance Pioneer* (Pennington: Dance Horizons, 2006); UW Department of Dance, *Volume: 5 Eve Gentry: Tenant of the Street*, accessed August 4, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZQAMF8FgSc.

"Dancing in Absolute Eden" currently stands as the most comprehensive account of Gentry's life and work, though it concludes in the late 1930s just as her solo career began.[372] In addition to these sources, Gentry's oral histories provide invaluable insights on her artistic process. I augment all of these sources with personal correspondence with Newhall, pieces shared with me by Newhall from Gentry's papers (housed by Newhall), newspaper reviews, photographs, and archival findings from non-Gentry collections at publicly accessible archives. It is important to note the fragmentary nature of this chapter's analysis of Gentry. The lack of current Gentry scholarship points to a conundrum often faced by dance studies: although dance is an embodied art form, Western concert dancers with large, publicly-accessible material collections tend to receive more scholarly attention than those with few material remains. However, I contend that Gentry's stories are too important and her interventions too exigent for modern dance history to not document and analyze what little fragments of her career are accessible. It is my hope that this chapter fuels a greater awareness and more scholarly examination of Gentry. For those who innovate upon established forms and techniques in transitional moments of modern dance and national history shape both of those histories just as much as those who create new techniques at key historical moments and leave behind vast material collections. As a women's critical history, my analysis of Gentry honors subtle moments of transition and resists a prioritization of dominant narrations of modern dance in the midcentury reliant upon troves of material evidence.

Gentry's ways of innovating on established presentational frames spoke to her love of improvisation. It was after experiencing improvisation at a modern German dance class taught by

---

[372] Mary Anne Santos Newhall, "Dancing in Absolute Eden" (Albuquerque, The University of New Mexico, 1998).

Ann Mundstock in California that Gentry burnt her tutu and pointe shoes.[373] This marked her abandonment of her previous ballet training and a new dedication to modern dance.[374] Although Gentry's particular mode of improvisation included structured movement phrases, it highlighted the importance of the individual in her work. This practice of improvisation resonated with those of Gentry's New York mentor Holm and Holm's mentor Wigman. For Wigman, improvisation was a means through which she could alter movement by adjusting its formal aspects.[375] Holm continued Wigman's conceptualization of improvisatory dance, but with a focus on compositional principles and technique.[376] These modes of improvisation enabled Gentry to balance clear technique with space for individual experience and expression. An attention to individuals as material realities shaped by and shaping a tangible world, or, as Susan Leigh Foster or Melissa Blanco Borelli might say, corporealities, aided an overall attempt in Gentry's oeuvre to demetaphorize Americana works.[377] It should also be noted that her reliance on improvisation, even if a mode that was highly technical and carefully planned, might have contributed to the lack of previous critical and scholarly attention to Gentry in comparison to her contemporaries. US modern dance was biased against improvisation, and its connotations of German dancers, from the late 1930s through the 1960s.[378] Similarly, Gentry's favored aesthetic of socialist realism rapidly grew out of critics' favor during the 1940s. In this way, she danced

---

[373] Mercy Sidbury, *Eve Gentry: Kaleidoscopic History*, ed. Jeff Friedman (San Francisco: Museum of Performance and Design, 1991), 14.
[374] Ibid.
[375] Susan Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon: The Dances of Mary Wigman*, Second Edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1993] 2006), 54.
[376] Ibid., 273.
[377] Susan Foster, ed., *Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, Culture and Power* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995); Melissa Blanco Borelli, *She Is Cuba: A Genealogy of the Mulata Body* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). I am drawing from Susan Leigh Foster's and Melissa Blanco Borelli's theorizations of corporeality in my understanding of Gentry's attention to material realities of the individual.
[378] Susan Manning, "Ausdruckstanz across the Atlantic," in *Dance Discourses: Keywords in Dance Research*, ed. Susanne Franco and Marina Nordera (London: Routledge, 2016), 46–60.

during the 1940s at the nexus of two increasingly unpopular aesthetics. In addition to her training with Mundstock and later time as a key member in Holm's company, both of which informed her use of improvisation, three artists greatly influenced Gentry's artistry: Wigman, Japanese modern dancer Michio Ito, and German expressionist visual artist Käthe Kollwitz. Her inspiration from these artists fueled her attention to issues of social justice through dance.

In the case of Wigman, Gentry gained inspiration not only from watching her dance, but also from waiting for her. After seeing Wigman perform in San Francisco in 1932, Gentry took copious notes on the show and what she saw as an ugliness and sincerity to Wigman's work.[379] She then waited all day at Wigman's hotel in hopes of meeting the star. Although the wait did not result in a Wigman meeting, Gentry used the time to write a manifesto that resonated throughout her career:

> Those who think that dancing should be bees, butterflies and flowers are living in an unreal world, they have not grown up sufficiently to face the realities of life. Life is not bees, butterflies and flowers. And if dancing is to be an art, it must, as in all the other arts, be our expression, an assimilation of life itself. . . Those who refuse to recognize the realities of life are doomed...
>
> What bliss it must be for one to be able to live all one's life believing that dancing is bees, butterflies and flowers. It is like believing that the stork brings babies. Such a person certainly should play no part in the true dance for in pure joy, great joy, there is also a kind of pain.[380]

---

[379] Newhall, "Dancing in Absolute Eden." 39.

[380] Eve Gentry, "Impressions of the Danse," 1932, Eve Gentry Papers. Quoted in Newhall, "Dancing in Absolute Eden," 40.

Dance, for Gentry, had a responsibility to express difficulties of life. She saw attending to life's challenges as the only way to access a joy grounded in reality. In writing this manifesto, she refused dance based in naïve optimism and, crucially, metaphor. What she interpreted as Wigman's ugly sincerity held the refusal of metaphor that Gentry desired for dance. This manifesto could be interpreted as a succinct explanation of her Americana works a decade later. In contrast to those of Graham's mystical Southwest or pioneer conquest, Broadway and ballet choreographer Agnes de Mille's happy depictions of an imagined West, or even Maslow's re-embodiments of Americana nostalgia, Gentry choreographed in ways that satirically pointed to the falsity of those depictions and then used that satire to critique her contemporary US modern dance and political milieu. Similar to how Gentry burnt her tutu and pointe shoes in favor of more individualized expression in modern dance, this manifesto functioned as a burning of dance as metaphor in favor of dance as a way to express harsh realities.

Gentry galvanized her dedication to dance that presented realities of life the following year at master classes taught by Ito at San Francisco Western Women's Club. Ito was assisted by Hazel Wright, his wife and Gentry's earliest dance teacher in San Bernardino.[381] In addition to learning Ito's movement vocabulary, especially his signature ten gestures, Gentry took note of a thread in his pedagogy that connected to her manifesto from the previous year. She wrote in her notes from one of the master classes that "1. The dancer must have something to say; 2. Must know what it is before starting to dance; 3. Must say it as simply and plainly as possible; 4. Must say it definitely, concisely" followed by points on a dancer's artistic process, Japanese

---

[381] Ibid., 48.

vocabulary, and music.[382] These first four points demonstrate the importance Gentry attributed to dance that clearly communicated an exigent message. In the case of her Americana works, this intention came to serve both a critique of the form as well as of US culture.

Gentry's commitment to dancing harsh experiences without the mitigation of metaphor could also be attributed to her inspiration from Kollwitz. The visual artist's late nineteenth and early twentieth century depictions of the impacts of war, poverty, and injustice on poor peoples, especially women and children, served as a continual reference point for Gentry. In fact, she later told Newhall that she never choreographed without looking at a book of Kollwitz's paintings.[383] These art works possessed the ugliness and sincerity that Gentry found in Wigman as well as the intentional, concise statement she noted in Ito. Taken together, Wigman, Ito, and Kollwitz provided Gentry with an artistic philosophy that placed non-metaphorical commentary on social injustices and life challenges as a key part of the choreographic process. Although non-metaphorical choreography tended towards literal representations of a given piece's intended message, it could also include moments of abstraction or structured improvisation from one movement phrase to another. An emphasis on the individual enabled Gentry to infuse abstract moments into dances that otherwise conveyed meanings in literal ways.

After arriving in New York in 1936, work with Holm and then New Dance Group strengthened Gentry's aesthetic. Dancing in Holm's *Trend* (1937), a piece demonstrating the dangers of a dictator, served as a defining experience for Gentry. Holm's choreography in the piece brought together narrative representation of the social commentary story and abstract

---

[382] Eve Gentry, "Eve Gentry's Notes from Master Class with Michio Ito," June 5, 1933, Eve Gentry Papers. Quoted in Newhall, "Dancing in Absolute Eden," 153.
[383] "Eve Gentry | Department of Dance | University of Washington," accessed December 14, 2021, https://dance.washington.edu/people/eve-gentry.

movement that conveyed a sense of something larger than the dance onstage. This mode of representation that allowed for literal depiction of meanings and moments of abstraction would manifest in Gentry's later Americana dance. When explaining *Trend* as "the most profound experience in my career," Gentry connected it to her Jewish heritage.[384] She explained, "As a Jew, I had for years a deep-seated horror of the spectre of a dictator. In 1937, fear and apprehension were ever-present. So, I had sufficient identification with the subject to evoke meaningful dance action."[385] Gentry came from a religious family and even danced in temple services as a child.[386] These lived experiences not only impacted her outlook on issues of social justice and *Trend*, but also her alignment with New Dance Group.

Most of New Dance Group's Jewish daughters of immigrants came from New York's Lower East Side, including Maslow. Although Gentry's childhood was geographically far removed from theirs, she fit into the Group's leftist ethos. Choreographed before she officially joined New Dance Group, her solo *Tenant of the Street* quickly became a fixture of the Group's most well-known solos when she joined as a teacher in 1943 (though she had performed as part of New Dance Group recitals prior to that).[387] Her representation of an impoverished woman accompanied by street sounds set Gentry on the path of a soloist engaged in social and political critique. The relationship of Gentry's dances to the Americana frame with a special attention to protesting injustice in a non-obstruse way manifested for critics largely as literal representations of the folksy Americana frame in service of protest. As a dance writer for *The Daily Worker*

---

[384] Eve Gentry, "The 'Original' Hanya Holm Company," *Choreography and Dance* 2, no. 2 (1992): 25.
[385] Ibid., 23.
[386] Newhall, "Dancing in Absolute Eden," 41.
[387] Katherine Wolfe, "Eve Gentry Biography," n.d., Katherine Wolfe Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

phrased it, "Gentry's dances are concerned chiefly with protest and folk themes."[388] Whereas Maslow's Americana dances enacted what the US could be in utopic or dystopic ways, Gentry satirized and protested its current state.

Entertaining at the USO as an American Woman

As did many of her contemporaries, Gentry toured with a USO group in the early 1940s.[389] She had a personal connection to the cause because her husband, Bruce Gentry, was in Europe fighting in the war. In addition to enabling her to contribute to a meaningful effort, the USO stage proved an apt means for her to develop an artistic philosophy outside of Holm. It gave her the freedom to experiment in the solo form. These performances also fit with the anti-fascist commitments of New Dance Group. Many Group members performed on the USO stage, as well as leftist or communist rallies, in support of wartime mobilization and service members. For example, Gentry featured her solos at a concert given in the early 1940s by American Youth for Democracy, a communist organization for young adults during the war. The program for that performance read similarly to one for a USO event, emphasizing support for service members and the necessity of wartime mobilization.[390] Although USO and wartime rally performances elicited from leftist dancers a similar mode of patriotism aligned with anti-Fascism, USO events entailed an additional layer of gendered politics within a display of US empire. Similar to the ways in which Primus's USO performances discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation brought into question the place of Blackness and transnational leftism within US empire, Gentry's illuminated the harsh gendered politics and expectations for female bodies during war and

---

[388] "Dance Festival at Mansfield Theatre, May 23-27," *Daily Worker*, May 18, 1948.
[389] Sidbury, *Eve Gentry: Kaleidoscopic History*, 44.
[390] "Sweethearts of Servicemen of American Youth for Democracy: A Salute to Our Fighting Boys Rally," n.d. Katherine Wolfe Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

enactments of US empire. Critics grouped Gentry's *Goodbye My Johnny*, *Four Walls Blues*, and *Bitter-sweet Blues* together as her blues dances.[391] In these pieces, she intervened in precedent for danced contemplations of the role of women during the war. These pieces' reception profoundly impacted her.

Similar to Primus and Maslow, Gentry choreographed on themes of women's labor, perseverance, and loneliness during the war. For example, she often danced *Goodbye, My Johnny* (ca. 1941) for USO canteens, hospitals, and service clubs in addition to her concert dance recitals.[392] Characteristic of much of her repertoire during the 1940s, Gentry brought Holm technique into conversation with socialist realism, a mode favored by many leftist modern dancers during the late 1930s. Dancing as a woman waiting for her lover to return from war carried personal significance for Gentry as she awaited her husband's return. In contrast to her aptitude for satire and exaggeration, *Goodbye, My Johnny* relied on choreographic simplicity to convey the piece's meanings. Doris Hering of *Dance Magazine* alluded to the surprise of the dance's simplicity as coming from Gentry. She remarked that the work was "our favorite of Miss Gentry's solos. Here she does not over-dance, nor does she constantly search for startling movement. She uses her fine technique to create a simple, poignant portrait of a woman whose man has gone to war."[393] Dancing to an arrangement of a "song of the American Revolution" in a costume designed by Sylvia Thumin, Gentry performed one facet of the impact of war on women.[394] Her musical choice connected her dance to not only World War II, but also to a

[391] Joan Larkey, "Eve Gentry," *Dance Observer* 16, no. 10 (December 1949): 153.
[392] Wolfe, "Eve Gentry Biography."
[393] Hering, "The Season in Review," 11.
[394] Wolfe, "Eve Gentry Biography"; "Sweethearts of Servicemen of American Youth for Democracy: A Salute to Our Fighting Boys Rally."

longer legacy of war. Although *Goodbye, My Johnny* conveyed an acute loneliness, Gentry did not present her character as helplessly waiting. Instead, as Hering noted, she focused on clear modern dance technique. This emphasis on technique fostered a sense of labor, just as how Maslow sought to highlight women's labor in *Folksay*. This precise modern dance directed spectators' attention to Gentry's singular dancing body at work. Her character engaged in meticulous labor while awaiting her lover's return.

In contrast to the somber *Goodbye, My Johnny*, Gentry struck a more playful tone while still evoking themes of women during the war in *Four Walls Blues* (1941) and *Bittersweet Blues* (ca. 1941). She found these "romantic" dances "nice to do" for her service member audiences, alluding to the gendered and sexualized demands of USO performances on female dancers.[395] *Four Walls Blues* and *Bittersweet Blues* featured flirtatious choreography with costumes designed by Thumin and set to three-and-a-half-minute jazz records by Meade Lux Lewis and Sidney Bechet, respectively.[396] In the 1930s and 1940s, jazz music was growing more common among modern dancers for the concert stage. Gentry followed her interest in jazz after receiving encouragement from modern dancer Anna Sokolow.[397] Little remains of *Four Walls Blues* though it was likely an unnamed piece that Gentry described in an oral history as "romantic in some ways."[398] She characterized *Bittersweet Blues* as "a very romantic kind of sexy dance" performed in a "shocking pink big skirt and a white lace tutu."[399] She maintained her concert modern dance technique in these pieces, combining Holm's expressionist vocabulary with

---

[395] Sidbury, *Eve Gentry: Kaleidoscopic History*, 44.
[396] "Eve Gentry at Hunter Playhouse Program," November 6, 1949, Katherine Wolfe Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
[397] Newhall, "Dancing in Absolute Eden," 123.
[398] Sidbury, *Eve Gentry: Kaleidoscopic History*, 44.
[399] Ibid.

socialist realism in her romantic portrayal of a woman alone in four walls or dancing in a bittersweet way without a partner. Gentry explained that her "first interest has always been as a soloist."[400] In these romantic evocations of loneliness, though, her solo body took on new tenors of meaning outside of modern dance's long history of female soloists. In these blues dances, Gentry conveyed a woman anxious for the return of her lover but carrying on with perseverance and charm. In the case of her reception at USO performances, though, her body took on many fraught demands of the venue and its servicemen.

Those demands manifested in, what Gentry described as, a "melodramatic" experience that resulted in her changing her name from Henrietta Greenhood to Eve Gentry.[401] When dancing at a 1942 USO event held at a psychiatric facility on Long Island, as at all USO events, Gentry was expected by the venue to not only dance, but also to "entertain" servicemen.[402] As she recalled, "I had to…listen to them and hold their hand. You know it was a lot."[403] When carrying out her entertainment duties, a soldier latched onto her and would not let her out of his sight for the day, even going into the restroom with her.[404] As Gentry remarked on the psychological toll of this event on her: "I didn't know where Bruce was at that time. I knew he was someplace in the European Theater but I didn't know where. Of course, that had me worried anyway, but spending the day with this guy made me more anxious, more fearful."[405] When she finally escaped to the performers' dressing room just before the show was to start, Gentry "broke

[400] Wolfe, "Eve Gentry Biography."
[401] James Chladek, "Dance On with Billie Mahoney, Eve Gentry, Part 1," *Dance On with Billie Mahoney* (Kansas City: Dance on Video, 1990).
[402] Ibid.
[403] Ibid.
[404] Sidbury, *Eve Gentry: Kaleidoscopic History*, 44.
[405] Ibid.

down and wept bitterly."[406] The other performers on the tour attempted to comfort her, saying they had all experienced similar events and these occurrences should be considered as part and parcel of the USO circuit. The day, however, went from bad to worse.

Gentry took the stage for her blues dances only to hear the announcer incorrectly pronounce her name and refer to her in a "flippant" way by using terms for her as a "sexpot" that she found to be "thoughtless" and of "bad manners."[407] She assumed that the announcer used such language in order to generate a sexualized interest in her among the audience and took the stage. When she danced the two pieces, men shouted, cried, moaned, and "went bezerk."[408] Despite Gentry's increasingly distraught state throughout the day, she recalled her fellow performers attempting to comfort her on the way home. They insisted to her "you have to take this. It was probably good for the guys. It was good therapy."[409] Gentry concluded the story by explaining, "when I got home, I was very exhausted and disturbed and I thought then, I've got to change my name."[410] Gentry's telling of this traumatic event revealed why she changed her name and, more so, the complex ways in which her USO performances required her to perform a particular kind of American woman that impacted her interventions in the Americana frame.

Goodbye, My Johnny, *Four Walls Blues*, and *Bittersweet Blues* evoked nostalgia for a time without war. Whether through thematic content of labor and loneliness or of a joy void of war concerns, these pieces added an inconclusive, as Svetlana Boym might theorize,[411] reflective element to that nostalgia by raising questions about the role of women during the war. These

---

[406] Ibid.
[407] Ibid, 45.
[408] Ibid.
[409] Ibid.
[410] Ibid, 46.
[411] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*.

solos, however, cannot be divorced from the USO context in which Gentry so often performed them. The USO circuit required her to perform outside of her time onstage in ways that also evoked a nostalgic longing for a particular kind of sexualized American woman caring for men. Both Gentry's onstage and offstage USO performances spoke to the corporeal impacts of war on women. The disturbing reality of Gentry's time on the USO circuit demonstrated a key way in which wartime mobilization gave way to displays of US empire and an objectification of the female body. These USO events created a framing mechanism through which definitions of race, gender, and sexuality would be articulated in line with the demands of a white and masculinist US empire (the military and USO shows were mostly segregated during World War II). Gentry's experiences of these events demonstrated how women's corporealities were expected to happily perform whatever nostalgic longing was desired by the overwhelmingly white and male audiences.

Gentry's recollections of trauma on the USO circuit raise questions as to why Primus spoke highly of her time at USO performances, especially when photographic evidence reveals the racialized, exoticizing framing through which her performances were situated, as discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. It is important to remember that the stakes of these performances were starkly different for Primus and Gentry. Both women utilized them as ways to gain employment; develop their choreographic repertoires; and prove themselves in the modern dance scene. Similarly, both Gentry and Primus were committed to the Cultural Front and to transnational, leftist causes that aligned with the war's fight against fascism. Although Gentry experienced an anxiety at USO events given her husband's role fighting in Europe, she did not hold quite the same political stakes as Primus did. In the wartime mobilization context, it was

crucial that Primus show support for the USO stage in order to overtly display her commitment to the Double V Campaign and its fight for racial justice in the US. Primus also carried the weight of performing a commensurability between Blackness and US empire because she insisted that the military desegregate for her USO shows. In other words, Primus had more at risk and less room for vocal critique of the military than did Gentry. Instead of viewing Gentry's USO experience as idiosyncratic, I suggest that it crucially reveals the ways in which that venue demanded enactments of race, gender, and sexuality concomitant with a burgeoning idea of US empire. Differently racialized, gendered, or sexualized dancers held different stakes for claiming places for their identities within that US empire frame. The nostalgic longing of a woman for a time without war in *Goodbye, My Johnny*, *Four Walls Blues*, and *Bittersweet Blues* enabled Gentry to comment upon the lived experiences of women during war. Her reception, though, twisted that nostalgic longing in a way that imagined a US empire in which women's corporealities would be at the service of its white men. When viewed from either the angle of Gentry as choreographer or her USO audiences' reactions, these pieces centered the phenomenological experience of women within an expanding US empire.

Making the West Real through Exaggerated Movement

In resonance with Gentry's centering of women's corporeal experiences within scenarios of US empire, she demetaphorized scenarios of a mythical, expansive West.[412] In both of those genres of Americana dance, she focused on tangible, corporeal experiences in ways that fit within Popular and Cultural Front allegiances of New Dance Group. Maslow, too, mobilized the

[412] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 28. I use "scenario" here in Taylor's definition of the term as "meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes."

Americana frame in ways that honored a common people. For Maslow, though, an intervention could be made in the fact of staging a diverse community of common folks within a well-rehearsed, mythical modern dance definition of the US West. In Gentry's deployment of the frame, however, the key intervention was located in satirizing mythical imaginings of the West and using a blend of abstract expressionist movement with literal representation in order to point to an incommensurability between common people of the West as a metaphor and as a lived reality.

In addition to speaking to, and moving away from, Americana works of Maslow and Graham, Gentry's Western Americana works converged, satirized, and diverged from those on the Broadway and ballet stages. By the mid-1940s, both Broadway and ballet had grown more commercialized and desirable for modern dance choreographers. For example, ballet and Broadway choreographer de Mille premiered *Rodeo* set to music by Aaron Copeland and danced by Ballet Russes de Monte Carlo in 1943. The work contained five episodes that showed scenes of cowboys and cowgirls in the US Midwest and West. She continued to work in themes of the US Midwest in her choreography for the 1943 Broadway production *Oklahoma!* As in *Rodeo*, de Mille's choreography for *Oklahoma* captured an imagining of the Midwest and West as an expansive area in which (white) bodies could take the territory into their kinespheres.

As the 1940s transitioned to formalist and male-dominated modern dance, ballet and Broadway held an increasing importance for female modern dance choreographers. After Holm disbanded her company in 1941 due to an inability to meet its financial burden, she went to the Broadway stage and found great success. Holm even (tumultuously) collaborated with de Mille for Cole Porter's 1950 production of *Out of This World*, in which Janet Collins danced a leading

role and marked her departure from the modern dance stage for Broadway and then ballet. Similarly, modern dance choreographer Helen Tamiris moved to Broadway and Primus danced in her 1946 *Show Boat*, which premiered in the same year as her choreography for Wild West imaginings in *Annie Get Your Gun*. These works are only a small sampling of the proliferation of modern dance and dancers on the Broadway stage during the 1940s. Importantly in the case of Gentry's Americana works, themes of the US Midwest and West swept the Broadway and ballet circuits. Gentry followed that trend in her Western Americana dances, though choreographed through the lens of satire.

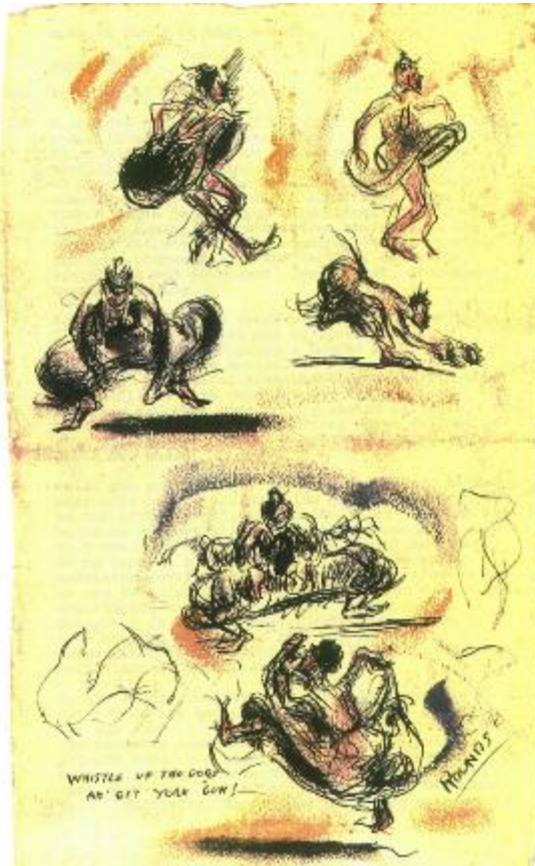


Figure 9 (left): "Performance sketches of Eve Gentry in 'Groundhog Hunt,'" 1946 or 1947. Artist: Glen Rounds. Eve Gentry: Kaleidoscopic History, San Francisco Museum of Performance and Design.

Figure 10 (right): Gentry in *Groundhog Hunt* at its New York City premiere, 1945. Photographer: Bruce Gentry. Courtesy of Core Dynamics Pilates and Kevin A. Bowen.

In *Groundhog Hunt* (1945), Gentry satirized modern dance, ballet, and Broadway depictions of the West through tactics of literal representation and exaggeration. Danced to a folk song from South Carolina in a dress with a billowing skirt designed by Helen Frank, *Groundhog Hunt* showcased Gentry's specialty in buoyant movement.[413] A series of sketches of her in the piece drawn by Glen Rounde in 1946 or 1947 demonstrate both Gentry's buoyancy and an exaggerated movement (Figure 9). With a caption of "whistle up the dogs an' git your gun!"

[413] Sidbury, *Eve Gentry: Kaleidoscopic History*, i.

Rounde details moments from *Groundhog Hunt* in which Gentry moves quickly with her skirt billowing, bends low to the ground as though about to slide down in order to catch something, and takes off running with her chin up in determination. In all of the movements Rounde draws, Gentry moves with a quality of freedom in taking up space akin to that Graham used in *Frontier*. In contrast to Graham or Western imaginings on the modern dance, ballet, or Broadway stages, Gentry enlarges her already full movements to the point of satire. For example, in one movement she reaches down to the ground with her bottom in the air. She does so with such a powerful thrust of energy that she appears to be nearly knocked to the ground. Similarly in another movement, she takes off running with her arms and legs swinging far more than in a quotidian run or a graceful concert dance stride. In a photo of the solo, she combines her signature buoyant jumps with an exaggerated run (Figure 10). Her left elbow and right foot push upwards as though in an intractable gallop. In the sketches and photograph of *Groundhog Hunt*, Gentry moves in such sweeping motions and takes up so much space that she appears to lose control. She attempts to conquer over the imagined West, but her oversized movements render her unable to embody the kind of authority exhibited in the Americana works of, for instance, Graham or Maslow. Instead, she produces a comical commentary on the idea of a groundhog hunt in the West.

In *Groundhog Hunt*, Gentry re-embodied contemporary dance depictions of the West and pointed to the incongruity between those depictions and Western realities. In so doing, she invoked the nostalgia of her contemporaries' deployments of the Americana frame and then ironized that nostalgia, generating an inconclusive sense of Americanness. Dance writer Katherine Wolfe described the piece as "an amusing folk piece with L'il Abnerish overtones."[414]

[414] Wolfe, "Eve Gentry Biography."

L'il Abner was a satirical cartoon strip that poked fun at rural US citizens. In this comment, Wolfe not only pointed to *Groundhog Hunt*'s satire, but also its use of literal representation in a widely accessible, popular way. This use of literal representation rendered Gentry in a negative light for many dance critics who were in the process of embracing formalist abstraction and moving away from theatricalism. As a *Dance Observer* critic explained:

> [*Groundhog Hunt*] is a good example of Miss Gentry's concern with motivation derived from literary idea, (in this case from words of a song,) rather than from movement idea. Movement used in this way becomes slave to a mental idea rather than a vehicle for it. This is unnecessary as Miss Gentry is certainly technically capable of delighting through movement.[415]

In her use of literal representation, as noted in this *Dance Observer* review, Gentry appealed to the socialist realism common in Popular Front aesthetic practices. These conventions placed her within New Dance Group's commitment to the Cultural Front. At the time of *Groundhog Hunt*'s premiere in 1945, New Dance Group was gradually minimizing the overt political protest that had been so important to it in the 1930s and early 1940s and its use of socialist realism. In this way, Gentry's satire of modern dance, ballet, and Broadway depictions of the West carried an additional facet in that it could be read as a critique of New Dance Group's and modern dance choreographers' moves away from socialist realism and the particular political interventions allowed by that genre.

Gentry continued her satirical takes on dance depictions of the West in *Quiet Day in the Wild, Wild West* (1949). She utilized literal representation and ironic movement to parody

[415] Larkey, "Eve Gentry," 152.

imaginings of cowboys and cowgirls in the West. Set to music by Leroy Anderson and danced in a short dress designed by Frank, the piece carried many similarities to *Groundhog Hunt* both in its choreography and commentary. As Wolfe described, the solo was "a good-humored satire on the bold, bad, gun-totin' hombre of Grade B westerns."[416] Her notes on the piece further characterized it as a satire of Broadway's depictions of the West.[417] With her magnified parody of a cowboy archetype, Gentry entered into conversation with works such as de Mille's ballet *Rodeo* or Tamiris's choreography for Broadway's *Annie Get Your Gun* and demetaphorized their portrayals of the West.

Figure 11: Gentry in *Quiet Day in the Wild, Wild West*, 1950. Photographer: Bruce Gentry Courtesy of Core Dynamics Pilates and Kevin A. Bowen

Despite *Quiet Day in the Wild, Wild West*'s similarities to *Groundhog Hunt*, a *Dance Observer* critic took it as more successful than the latter because of its attention to movement technique over representation. The review stated that Gentry proved her ability to delight

[416] Wolfe, "Eve Gentry Biography."
[417] Ibid.

spectators through technique in *Quiet Day in the Wild, Wild West*. It went on to explain that in the piece she "very successfully employs a movement theme to put across the infectious humour [sic] of her concept."[418] This review proposed that movement was central to Gentry's critique. A photograph of the piece showed her hovering just above the ground, appearing to float in her characteristic buoyant movement quality (Figure 11). The solo did not convey a significantly greater focus on movement technique or lesser attention to representation than in *Groundhog Hunt*. Perhaps the movement came across as more important in *Quiet Day in the Wild, Wild West* than in *Groundhog Hunt* because of its clear parody of popular Broadway choreography that was increasingly important in the New York modern dance scene.

The move from modern dance to Broadway and the financial repercussions of that transition were very much on the minds of choreographers and dance critics. In contrast to her mentor Holm, Gentry could be viewed by critics as holding steadfast to modern dance even as the presence of women choreographers and Gentry's favored socialist realism diminished over the course of the 1940s. In 1949, a *New York Herald Tribune* article used Gentry's recitals that year at 92Y and Hunter Playhouse as case studies for the dismal financial prospects of modern dance soloists. It explained that for her Hunter Playhouse recital "even if every seat in the hall is sold her 'profit' will come to only $65. As a return for months of preparation, years of training and the risk of more than $1,000, this is hardly a commercial proposition."[419] After detailing every dollar spent for Gentry's recital, the article elaborated on the lack of a viable option for the financial future of Gentry's performances and modern dance more generally. It stated that

---

[418] Larkey, "Eve Gentry," 152-153.
[419] "'Modern' Dance Devotees Present Concerts Heedless of Any Profit," *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*, November 6, 1949.

booking a venue with a larger seating capacity would not make the recital commercially viable "because the followers of the modern dance aren't numerous enough now, except in the cases of a few performers who have long-established reputations, to fill a larger hall."[420] This article's references to commercial viability alluded to Broadway and its growing financial success inclusive of modern dance choreographers. The lack of modern dance audiences could be attributed to a splintering the form underwent in the mid-to-late-1940s as ethnic dance evolved into a genre of its own and female modern dancers left the form for ethnic dance, Broadway, and ballet. Although the article indicated that some modern dance companies maintained large audiences, that was the exception as the Denishawn, Holm, and Humphrey-Weidman companies all had disbanded.

The *New York Herald Tribune* article concluded that Gentry was giving her recital despite its financial failure because "the modern dance movement is a cause, and its partisans don't think in terms of profits and loss."[421] Here, the article positioned her as outdatedly clinging to modern dance as a non-capitalist movement, or, as in line with New Dance Group's waning political commitments. In addition to fostering comparisons to New Dance Group, for which she was a director and teacher, Gentry's literal representation of Americana themes lent for quick comparisons to Broadway. Taken together, reviews of *Quiet Day in the Wild, Wild West* and this article on Gentry's futile financial profits revealed that the solo's satire of Broadway not only demetaphorized commercial representations of the West, but also critiqued the capitalism inherent in those depictions on the commercial stage.

---

[420] Ibid.
[421] Ibid.

In her mobilizations of the US West and Midwest Americana frame in *Groundhog Hunt* and *Quiet Day in the Wild, Wild West*, Gentry demetaphorized land and bodies of the rural US. Through satire of popular portrayals of these regions on the modern dance, ballet, and Broadway stages, she showcased how artists profited off of metaphorized imaginings of these regions. She built upon the Cultural Front's allegiances to common folks and the popularity of Americana works. Gentry's aptitude for socialist realism aided the modes of literal representation she used to specifically dance in conversation with Broadway choreographies of the US West and Midwest. By staying recognizably close to popular uses of the Americana frame, she invoked that frame's nostalgia for bodies moving expansively in open space. Through exaggerated movement, she satirized those longings and pointed to the incongruity of previous and contemporary danced depictions of the West and Midwest. As critics picked up these solos' critiques of Broadway choreographically, they also alluded to the political implications of her commentary. In *Magnolia Ladyhood* (1946), Gentry's use of satire and well-known dance references resulted in her most overtly protest Americana work.

A Satirical and Scathing Dance of Southern Americana

Gentry built upon US modern dance's precedent for lynching dances that protested racial oppression in her *Magnolia Ladyhood.* The solo particularly followed the model set by Primus's *Strange Fruit* in which Primus danced as a white female member of a lynch mob accompanied by narration of Lewis Allan's poem by the same title.[422] For *Magnolia Ladyhood*, Gentry danced as a Southern white woman who was complicit in a lynching (Figure 19). She set the long solo to

[422] Mary Anne Santos Newhall, personal correspondence with author, September 8, 2021. Newhall informed me that Gentry commonly built upon choreographic inspiration from her peers. She and Primus (as well as Maslow and Erdman) were colleagues at New Dance Group.

music by Edward Mattos and narration of Langston Hughes's 1936 poem *Silhouette*. In the poem, Hughes addressed a "Southern gentle lady" after a lynching has taken place.[423] After describing the sight of a lynched Black man, Hughes remarked, "How Dixie protects / Its white womanhood."[424] Gentry divided her *Magnolia Ladyhood* into two main sections: "Part 1: Before Dawn," including "The Rendezvous is Over" and "Make Away with the Evidence," and "Part 2: That Afternoon," comprised of "Southern Gentle Lady" and "Iniquitous Invention."[425]

Gentry emphasized the complicity of white women in racial injustice. In this way, she picked up on one of many possible representational threads of Primus's *Strange Fruit* and magnified it through intense exaggeration. Hughes noticed the similarity between Primus's previous works and Gentry's *Magnolia Ladyhood*. When writing to grant her permission to use his poem, he mentioned that composer John Cage "did an interesting setting to a poem of mine for Pearl Primus."[426] Hughes was referencing Primus's piece *Our Spring Will Come*, one of her most overt danced protests against violence and injustices that resonated with *Magnolia Ladyhood.* He was very familiar with Primus's work and likely also recognized the similarities in Gentry's plan to Primus's *Strange Fruit*. Despite their similarities, Primus's *Strange Fruit* left room for interpretations of sympathy for her character (although that was not her stated intention and she did not labor to do so choreographically) and Gentry left no space for anything but condemnation of Southern white women.

---

[423] Langston Hughes, "Silhouette," in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Ernest Roessel (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 305.
[424] Ibid.
[425] Wolfe, "Eve Gentry Biography."
[426] Langston Hughes, "Letter from Langston Hughes to Eve Gentry," 1940s, Eve Gentry Papers.

Gentry took her practice of exaggerated movement to make a satirical point to an extreme level in the piece's choreography. As Wolfe described *Magnolia Ladyhood*:

> It is a bitter caricature of the decadent, psycho-neurotic type of Southern womanhood which has been immortalized in 'Gone with the Wind' and 'The Little Foxes.' It is definitely race-conscious and suggests in no gentle terms that lynching may not be the solution to the problem of insuring a women's virtue. In developing her theme she endeavored to indicate both overt behavior and psychological implications, which somewhat interfered with the clarity of the portrait.[427]

Wolfe found Gentry's exaggerated, mimetic movement as indicting Southern white women not only through their (in)actions, but also through their real or perceived psychological neuroses that contributed to Southern white concerns of protecting them. Similar to Wolfe, Walter Terry wrote of the piece for *Dance Observer*:

> [*Magnolia Ladyhood*] is an attempt to portray through harsh and biting comment a type of Southern womanhood which is, or was, marked by selfishness, hauteur, restlessness, superficial behavior and elements of the neurotic. It was this last attribute that Miss Gentry accented and her point of satire was obscured by the caricature she created, a caricature which appeared to combine the least savory aspects of Scarlett O'Hara and of several characters from 'The Little Foxes.'[428]

Both Wolfe and Terry saw Gentry's over-the-top caricature as a scathing critique of Southern white women and as so exaggerated that it muddied her satirical representation of her character.

---

[427] Ibid.
[428] Walter Terry, "New Dance Group: Eve Gentry Joins Festival Does Four Solos," *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*, May 26, 1948.

They both also aligned the dance with popular culture representations of Southern white women. Similar to how Gentry's West and Midwest Americana dances conversed with Broadway representations of the frame, she set *Magnolia Ladyhood* in conversation with commercial screen depictions of Southern white women. In so doing, she raised questions about why and how more sympathetic representations of Southern white womanhood were commercially viable and, therefore, sought by popular culture. Gentry implicated her audiences' consumption of works such as *Gone with the Wind* as part and parcel of her character's complicity in regimes of racial oppression and violence. Issues of racial injustice transcended politics, popular culture, and modern dance in *Magnolia Ladyhood*.

Wolfe took her definition of the work as "race-conscious" from a 1949 review of the piece Nik Krevitsky wrote for *Dance Observer.*[429] This term marked *Magnolia Ladyhood* as in line with previous lynching dances and spirituals as well as indicated a change in the definition of race that took place during the 1940s. In addition to lynching dances, *Magnolia Ladyhood* placed Gentry in a continuum of white, often Jewish, female modern dancers who choreographed protest against racial oppression while using sonic accompaniment by Black artists, such as narration of Hughes's poem for Gentry's piece. Tamiris's 1928 spirituals *Nobody Knows de Trouble I See* and *Joshua Fit de Battle ob Jericho* brought about a trend towards spirituals and works about oppressions confronted by African Americans on the modern dance stage.[430] Susan Manning explained that in a manifesto Tamiris wrote to accompany her 1928 performance,

---

[429] Nik Krevitsky, "Eve Gentry and Nona Schurman," *Dance Observer* 16, no. 6 (July 1949): 85; Wolfe, "Eve Gentry Biography."
[430] Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 1-2.

Tamiris used rhetoric of race in reference to nationality.[431] Within this definition of race, Tamiris's dance melded with its accompanying music by African American artists under the banner of Americanism.[432] This definition continued throughout the 1930s as white modern dancers used, what Manning termed as, "metaphorical minstrelsy" in order to attempt to embody the tenors of subjects of color within a shared nationality.[433] Although Tamiris used the term "race" at other times in a range of specific and universal meanings, she did not articulate a Black/white relationality as directly as critics did in response to *Magnolia Ladyhood*.

In the case of Gentry's *Magnolia Ladyhood*, "race" was used to refer to one's skin color within a Black or white scheme. As Manning has argued, the 1940s marked a crucial turning point in understandings of race in modern dance and "Negro dance."[434] One facet of this transformation was the impact of World War II on Jewish assimilation, as well as that of other European ethnicities, into whiteness. Gentry's characterization of a Southern white woman, therefore, took on additional significance as Jews' assimilation into whiteness brought Gentry's body and that of her character into a closer affiliation than they would have had before the war. As Jews and other European ethnic groups increasingly were taken by dominant society as white after the war, the bifurcation between whiteness and Blackness grew even as African American artists gained greater acceptance and prominence on the modern dance stage. By the time of *Magnolia Ladyhood*'s premiere in 1946, a description of the piece as "race-conscious" referred to its commentary on relations and injustices between Black and white Americans.

---

[431] Ibid., 2.
[432] Ibid.
[433] Ibid., 10.
[434] Ibid, xx.

Gentry's use of literal representation in *Magnolia Ladyhood* fit with her contemporary change from "race" as a term for a nationality in which all living in a nation could be metaphorically united to the term as an indicator of skin tone. In contrast to Tamiris's metaphorical embodiments of subjects of color, Gentry focused on representing white women in a way that was so exaggeratedly mimetic that it was seen by critics as taking away from the work's satire. As race came to be understood as the material conditions of a given corporeality due to that body's physical presentation, Gentry demetaphorized representations of race onstage. Hering of *Dance Magazine* picked up on Gentry's depiction of race as a relationality between Black and white Americans as well as her obvious use of the pre-established lynching category of dances, especially popularized by Primus. After describing Gentry as "often grim and bitter," Hering wrote of the piece as "meant to be a satire on the decadent southern women whose very dubious honor is protected whenever a Negro is lynched. And what an excellent theme that is!"[435] Critics tied Gentry's tactics for demetaphorizing dance and race to her knack for socialist realism and a strength of purpose. For example, John Martin wrote in the *New York Times* that Gentry exhibited a "complete emotional integrity" and then critiqued her use of representation.[436] He explained, "she is inclined to use the dance as an illustrative medium instead of as an independent and self-contained one. Often she relies on a literary line to hold together the elements of her composition."[437] When Martin wrote that review in the early years of the Cold War, socialist realism was outmoded and formalist abstraction was increasingly popular. Gentry's use of literal representation might have fit with her contemporary definitions of race,

[435] Hering, "The Season in Review," 11.
[436] John Martin, "New Dance Group Offers Novelties: Eva Gentry Makes Her First Appearance -- Hadassah Also Featured on Program," *New York Times*, May 26, 1948.
[437] Ibid.

but her demetaphorized depictions of Southern white womanhood did not fit into the demands of modern dance during the Cold War.

In *Magnolia Ladyhood*, Gentry played on the nostalgia for the South evoked by popular representations of Southern white women as well as a nostalgia for past modern dances on themes of lynching and spirituals. Through exaggerated, mimetic movement, she challenged both the premises of those nostalgias as feeding a desire for an ambiguous South and the complicity of Southern white women in racial injustice. In adapting themes of Southern white women from commercial film such as *Gone with the Wind*, she continued her commentary on desires of commercial stages from her Midwest and West Americana works. Critics found *Magnolia Ladyhood* noble in purpose, but so unsparing in its portrayal of Southern white women that some of its purpose was lost. Perhaps this criticism of the piece stemmed from critics' implicit comparisons of it to Primus's *Strange Fruit* in which the white female character could be interpreted in a somewhat sympathetic light. In this way, *Magnolia Ladyhood* revealed limits of white modern dance critics' desires for Americana nostalgia and for protest against racial oppression.

Satirizing and Re-Embodying the Americana Frame

Gentry re-imagined the Americana frame by demetaphorizing its conventional understandings of rural and minoritized bodies. She re-embodied visions of the West, Midwest, and South with her Jewish American body moving in exaggerated, satirical, and inconclusive ways. In resonance with Boym's theorization of reflective nostalgia and the room for questioning it allowed through tactics of irony,[438] Gentry danced unresolved questions of what the rural

---

[438] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*.

United States was really like and how white women could be forced out of their complicity in systemic racism. She elicited the nostalgia that was part and parcel of the Americana form and then highlighted its problems and possibilities through strategies of literal representation and satire.

Gentry's adherence to socialist realism even when mixed with a bit of abstract expressionism from Holm's technique belied her inspiration from Wigman's disregard for conventional beauty, Ito's tenets for dance from his master classes, Kollwitz's visual art, and her colleagues at New Dance Group. Additionally, Gentry's Eastern European Jewish background and its Jewish socialism manifested in how easily she fit into New Dance Group and its Cultural Front ethos even though she was from the opposite coast of most of the Group's dancers. Whether dancing blues that reflected upon women's lived experiences during the war, satirical depictions of the rural US, or critique of Southern white women, Gentry infused various modes of the Americana frame with an urgency to repair the world by bringing questions on its injustices for women and minoritized subjects to the fore.

***

Conclusion: A Disjunctive Americana

Maslow's and Gentry's re-imaginings and re-embodiments of the Americana frame cannot be divorced from their wartime and immediate postwar context of the assimilation of Jews and other European ethnicities into whiteness. Uneven distribution of federal benefits after the war along with Jews' solidified categorization as white widened a racial gap between Jews and African Americans. Maslow insisted through choreography and casting on an inclusive definition of American bodies with a diverse national body. In this way, she contributed to

wartime efforts for inclusion attempted to offset the deleterious implications of Jewish social uplift on African Americans after the war. Gentry's work to demetaphorize depictions of US land as well as racialized and gendered bodies resonated with the 1940s' changing definitions of "race." In the course of the decade, "race" in modern dance transformed from a capacious term for bodies united under a nationality or an even broader human race into a term to precisely stand for one's skin color and relations between Black and white bodies. In light of this context, Maslow's and Gentry's Jewish ethnic inflections took part in a national reconfiguration of race and ethnicity during the 1940s.

Maslow and Gentry mobilized the Americana frame in ways that capitalized on precedent for it and, especially, the expectation for evocations of nostalgia in it. They then choreographed disjunctures in order to critique previous visions promoted by the Americana frame premised on white bodies conquering open territory. For Maslow, this disjuncture took the form of a mismatch between sound and dance. In *Folksay* and *Champion*, she used music or narration that sounded of those previous visions promoted by the Americana frame or of all-American heroes and dance that either inserted minoritized, urban bodies into those visions through modern dance or warned of the danger of US empire. For Gentry, satire served as a means through which to dance demands for social justice and question women's phenomenological experiences during war and scenarios of US empire. Exaggerated movement and literal representation of textual sources enabled her to build upon socialist realism while also infusing abstract modern dance from her grounding in Holm's technique. In addition to dancing gendered and racial critique, Gentry choreographed an interrogation of capitalist forces, such as popular films or Broadway productions, that encouraged problematic representations of the rural US, women, and

minoritized subjects. For both Maslow and Gentry, familial backgrounds in Eastern European Jewish socialism colored their political concerns and choreography. Both women enacted disjunctive Americanas that de-homogenized previous uses of the form.

***

Epilogue

As modern dance in the 1940s moved away from women choreographers and theatrical aesthetics in favor of white men and formalist abstraction, Sophie Maslow and Eve Gentry moved in and out of modern dance and other modes of performance and movement. At the end of the decade, the wake of the Holocaust and the founding of the state of Israel brought about an effort among Jews in the West to promote Jewish culture and representations of Jewish bodies as strong and healthy.[439] Maslow took part in that activist trend through choreographing for Chanukah festivals held at Madison Square Garden from the 1950s through the 1970s. These dances promoted Zionism and Jewish biblical stories through modern dance, theatre techniques, and spectacle. Additionally, Maslow took part in the trend towards Jewish pride in *The Village I Knew* (1950), one of her most written-about pieces. *The Village I Knew* drew inspiration from Sholem Aleichem's stories and depicted an Eastern European Jewish shtetl before the war. She later founded her own dance company and continued to choreograph on Jewish themes as well as occasional abstract modern dance pieces. With her choreography for Chanukah festivals and *The Village I Knew*, Maslow not only participated in a trend towards Jewish pride, but also moved into the new ethnic dance genre, finding room for her work outside of modern dance and its desire for formalism.

---

[439] Angela Yarber, "Embodied Activism: Israeli Folk Dance Creating Social Change in the Jewish Community," *Implicit Religion* 16, no. 3 (2013): 289–300.

Similar to Maslow's work outside of modern dance in ethnic dance, Gentry increasingly worked in dance notation and Pilates after the 1940s. She continued to perform and choreograph modern dance with her Eve Gentry Dance Company, which was active from the mid-1940s through mid-1960s. Much of her work, though, took place in venues adjacent to dance practice. Gentry, Helen Priest Rogers, Janey Price, and Ann Hutchinson co-founded the Dance Notation Bureau, an organization for preserving existing choreography through Labanotation, in 1940. Her work with Dance Notation Bureau grew during the 1940s as she and her colleagues were enlisted by modern dance, ballet, and Broadway choreographers to notate their work. Also in 1940, Gentry began training with Joseph Pilates. The Pilates technique shaped her career, especially after it aided in her recovery from a radical mastectomy in 1955. Gentry went on to take part in the development of Pilates as she taught and practiced it in New York, including at Pilates's studio and at New York University's dance program under the leadership of Jean Erdman, and then in New Mexico after she moved there in the 1960s.[440] Both Gentry and Maslow moved in and out of modern dance and other movement techniques after the 1940s. They were able to do so because of the recognition they achieved as dancers and choreographers during that decade. They needed to do so because of the shifting demands of modern dance in the Cold War, demands in which their aesthetics did not easily fit.

---

[440] Sidbury, *Eve Gentry: Kaleidoscopic History*.

Chapter 3:

Finding Meaning in Movement: Jean Erdman's and Sybil Shearer's Abstraction as Americanist Dance

Jean Erdman and Sybil Shearer adopted techniques of formalist abstraction in ways that challenged conventions for representations of femininity and sexuality in modern dance. Both women turned to movement exploration for the basis of their works. They then found subtle, yet profound, meanings in their movement. Erdman paired her modern dance technique with knowledge of myth and literature in conversation with her husband Joseph Campbell. Often during her 1940s modern dances, she recognized and made clear proto-feminist, at times queer, evocations in her work. Although frequently interpreted by her critics as abstruse, her choreography resonated with the transition from theatricalism to formalist abstraction and the place of women within that change. Critics consistently lauded Shearer for her technical excellence and accompanying lighting designs by her artistic and life partner Helen Balfour Morrison. Critics also commented upon her dances' abstract and arcane nature. An analysis of several of her key works during the 1940s reveals a discrete attention to issues of loneliness and hiding or revealing one's identity. I argue that Erdman and Shearer queered the relationship between dance, abstraction, and gendered meaning.

In order to examine Erdman's and Shearer's choreographic processes, I draw from archival research, oral histories conducted with heirs to their work, and critical reception. My methodologies of performance reconstruction, revisionary dance historiography, and queer theory equip me to analyze how the women blurred lines between meaning and movement beyond interpretation in their 1940s dances. Similar to previous chapters, I examine the artists'

dances in program order based on a survey of their extant performance programs. In this chapter, though, program order functions less critically in my overall analysis than in previous chapters. Erdman regularly performed in recitals with other artists during the 1940s and, consequently, often excised some of her dances in order to fit into the time allotted for the entire production. In the final years of the 1940s, she choreographed ensemble works that were longer than the solos, duets, and trios of her early through mid-1940s repertoire. In those later recitals, she would occasionally slot some of the earlier, shorter works into the program. Shearer was consistently inconsistent in her recitals' offerings. Although her paper programs included nearly identical program orders throughout the 1940s, those programs were not an accurate indication of what she would actually perform. Numerous critics complained of her tendency to change her program offerings without notice. In following program orders most often documented for Erdman and Shearer, I reconstruct what an audience member might have expected when walking into the women's recitals with the acknowledgment that these expectations might have been met with surprise. I use this range of evidence and methodologies to demonstrate how Erdman and Shearer uniquely embodied and contested the proto-feminism of early modern dance uses of abstraction as well the queer white male modes of abstraction dominant in early Cold War modern dance. Although both women left behind vast archives, they have received a limited amount of previous scholarly attention due to their defiance of clear modern dance codes for representation or abstraction and, in the case of Shearer, limited public access to archival materials.

In this chapter I trace Erdman's and Shearer's dance works and writings during the 1940s. I begin with an explication of how earlier female modern dancers combined techniques of

representation and abstraction to pose proto-feminist interventions. I then examine how Erdman and Shearer built on those proto-feminist impulses in ways that challenged and queered the Americanness of American modern dance. Queer theories of temporality allow for an analysis of how the two women manipulated timing in their dances in ways that challenged heteronormative notions of linear time based on progress. I particularly focus on their dances that both received significant critical attention and troubled definitions and limits of meaning in dance. This chapter extends my dissertation's analysis of the aesthetic disentanglement of theatricalism and formalist abstraction by examining how it manifested in gendered and sexualized ways. It also complicates that disentanglement's presumption that movement could circumvent meaning. Picking up on the previous chapter's interrogation of Eve Gentry's distaste for the commercial stage in favor of a supposedly more serious modern dance, this chapter demonstrates how and why Erdman and Shearer went to great lengths in order to position themselves as part of the new abstract modern dance, not the commercial, theatrical stage. This chapter reveals how Erdman and Shearer performed critique of gender and sexual identities in conversation with shifting political and aesthetic regimes in US modern dance.

Representing and Abstracting a Proto-Feminist Modern Dance

During the late 1920s through 1930s, white female modern dancers combined tactics of theatricalism and abstraction into overall choreographic works. For example, Martha Graham created *Chronicle* (1936) to offer a depiction of war-related events from 1914 until 1936 as a means to combat fascism in Europe. She abstracted her (at the time) all-female company to portray broad scenarios consequent of a war against fascism. Similarly, Hanya Holm choreographed social commentary in opposition of a fascist dictator in *Trend* (1937). She

abstracted that narrative through non-representational movement to gesture to broader issues of humankind as danced by her all-female company. *Chronicle* and *Trend* demonstrate how the lines between representation and abstraction could be blurred even when in service of social commentary works that involved a degree of didacticism. In these works, white (often Jewish) women's bodies were understood by the artists and their critics to be capable of embodying modes of abstraction. Early modern dance's proto-feminist stance, advanced in large part by Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Holm, propelled this reliance on women's bodies to take on a myriad of meanings at the same time as to gesture to images and interpretations beyond the confines of words.

As US modern dance underwent an aesthetic disentanglement of theatricalism and formalist abstraction, white female bodies were no longer able to support interpretations of abstraction. White (queer) men, such as Merce Cunningham, Erick Hawkins, or Alwin Nikolais, came to stand for formalist abstraction's use of movement untethered to representational meaning. White women's bodies, in contrast, were taken as marked by theatricalism. Artists of color had not previously been allowed by white dance critics to be understood as abstract. The aesthetic disentanglement, though, rendered them even farther from abstraction and more locked into interpretations of theatricalism. For example, Pearl Primus was never able to receive recognition for her abstract solos. Critics were willing to interpret Janet Collins as abstract, but only after they implicitly racialized her and then used her ballet technique and choreographic signifiers of whiteness as evidence of her ability to transcend race- and gender-based theatricalism. The disentanglement of theatricalism from formalist abstraction neglected dances that combined theatricalism with various modes of abstraction because they did not neatly fit into

either pole of that aesthetic continuum. As a result, that disentanglement widened racial and gendered divides in US modern dance.

As the 1940s progressed, formalist abstraction came to stand as the Americanness of American modern dance. The reason for formalist abstraction's rise to stand as metonymic of American modern dance is twofold. First, the aesthetic served US modern dance's political crisis due to the Red and Lavender scares as it could obfuscate overt meaning or subversive subjectivities. Second, it aided critics in making sense of the art form's financial crisis as they could use it as evidence that modern dance was far removed from Broadway's theatricalism and its commercial success. The rise of formalist abstraction was strategic on the part of modern dance stakeholders. These stakeholders, though, did not push it in all circumstances. For instance, from the 1950s through the 1970s, the State Department's American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA) panel selected dance companies for tours abroad. ANTA sought companies that would present American culture as emblematic of freedom without engaging in practices that might be considered subversive. They selected choreographers who engaged in both theatricalism and abstraction in order to present their work as conventional enough to not be subversive but free enough to demonstrate democracy in the United States. Artists who went to the extreme end of formalist abstraction, such as Cunningham with his use of chance composition or Nikolais with his problematization of the human body, could have been too easily interpreted by foreign audiences as subversive. In other words, formalist abstraction represented freedom in movement for the sake of movement domestically, but could not be trusted to do so for international audiences. Formalist abstraction, in this way, functioned as a

way for US modern dance artists to present themselves and their work as American for US audiences tainted with the possibilities of surveillance as the nation headed into the Cold War.

Erdman and Shearer engaged in strategic acts of concealing and revealing meanings in their abstract dances for specific audiences. Their choreographic processes relied on movement apart from meaning and then a gradual allowance of interpretation done in conversation with trusted colleagues and collaborators. In focusing on women or queer subjectivities in their works, Erdman and Shearer troubled the assumed male gender of formalist abstraction and, as that aesthetic rose in dominance, of the Americanness of American modern dance. Both women's dances contained more facets of meanings and possible interpretations than they revealed in their published writings. Their choreographic notes and later interviews or writings demonstrated how Erdman and Shearer negotiated the contours of abstraction by focusing on proto-feminist visions of identity.

***

A Women-Centered Abstraction: Jean Erdman's Meaningful Movement Explorations

When reviewing a Jean Erdman Dance Company 1988 recital that included Erdman's 1940s repertoire, *Village Voice* critic Deborah Jowitt wrote of Erdman's trio *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle*, "like all the dances [choreographed by Erdman], it makes the performers appear not feminine, but resonantly female."[441] In this comment, Jowitt identified a mode of expressing female identity without adhering to conventional modes of depicting femininity. The movement

[441] Deborah Jowitt, "Rites for the Moribund," *The Village Voice*, July 12, 1988.

onstage allowed for both abstraction and complex considerations of gender. Jowitt's assertion resonated with most of Erdman's choreographic oeuvre from the 1940s. Although often characterized by critics (in sometimes contradictory ways) as too abstruse, emotional, or intellectual, Erdman's choreography presented a nuanced and multi-faceted understanding of the relationship between formalist abstraction and complex meanings. When choreographing, Erdman focused first and foremost on movement. She practiced such a great respect for movement on its own that her stance could reasonably be considered as in line with medium specificity. However, once that movement exploration was nearing completion, she allowed for an interpretation of meaning that the movement brought to the surface. In this chapter section, I analyze Erdman's simultaneously formalist abstract and women-centric works. I argue that she choreographed abstract movement exploration in ways that allowed for proto-feminist meanings to arise.

An analysis of Erdman's choreography requires a variety of sources. Archival materials, including choreographic notes, diary entries, copious notes on dance techniques, and photographs, as well as film of Erdman dancing and of performance reconstructions provide a wealth of knowledge about Erdman's artistic philosophy and practice. Critical reception, including that written by her husband and at-times collaborator, Campbell, contextualizes Erdman's interventions within a shifting cultural milieu. Additionally, conversations with Nancy Allison, dancer in Erdman's company and current Director of Jean Erdman Dance, provide insight on what it felt like to dance for Erdman and hear her comment upon the dances. This range of sources enables me to not only access multiple parts of Erdman's choreographed theories, but also to attend to various circles in which she was situated as an artist.

Erdman cannot easily be pinned into any one dance tradition or circle of contemporaries. She learned hula, various Asian theatre practices such as Noh, and Western concert dance techniques, including modern dance in the style of Isadora Duncan, as an Anglo-American child in Hawaii.[442] Travels around the world, especially to the Pacific, augmented her movement appreciation and practice.[443] She experimented with technique as she fused these modes of dancing together to serve her creative process. Erdman entered Sarah Lawrence College and met her then-professor, Campbell. His expertise in myth and folklore spoke to Erdman's interests in dance and aesthetics. As the two formed a relationship, Campbell's expertise found its way into Erdman's work, adding an additional layer to her understanding of what movement could do. After attending a summer at Bennington School of the Dance and taking classes from Graham at Sarah Lawrence, she left college to join Martha Graham Dance Company in 1938.[444] She quickly excelled in Graham's company, earning leading roles and critical acclaim. Composition classes given by Louis Horst provided Erdman with a grounding in choreographic techniques as she continued to excel as a Graham dancer. Also while in Graham's company, Erdman and Campbell developed a friendship with Merce Cunningham and his artistic and life partner composer John Cage (though Cage was then married to Xenia Cage, who was also part of the Erdman/Campbell/Cunningham friend and collaborator circle, at the time).[445] All of these modes

[442] Hannah C. Wiley, *Volume 8: Jean Erdman: Creature on a Journey*, 2013; "Jean Erdman Press Release for 1949-1950 Season," 1949, Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. A 1949 press release for Erdman highlights her training in ballet at the School of American Ballet; Spanish dance under José Fernandez; African dance with Pearl Primus; Hindu dance with Hadassah; hula in Hawaii from Mary Pukui; and Japanese dance at the Hisamata School in Hawaii,
[443] Jean Erdman, "Erdman Comments for Dances on Video," n.d., Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts; Wiley, *Volume 8*.
[444] Wiley, *Volume 8*.
[445] David Vaughan and Merce Cunningham, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years* (New York, NY: Aperture, 2005), 26-27.

of moving, thinking, and performing coalesced as Erdman developed her own artistic stance. In 1942, she left Graham and embarked on a choreographic career alongside Cunningham. After joint recitals with him and occasionally one other artist in 1942 and 1943, Erdman pursued her career independently. While her dance technique might not have ventured too far from the many styles of dance in which she had trained, she uniquely used those techniques in a way that combined movement exploration with complex rhythmic patterns. This aesthetic resulted in a challenging of expectations for progression of time and theatrical representation.

Although part of New Dance Group, which favored theatricalism, and also in conversation with Campbell and his colleagues who sought formalist abstraction, Erdman followed her own path through and beyond both of those aesthetic practices. She used evocative titles for her dances that conveyed meanings on which audiences could layer their own interpretations.[446] Her work, though, did not contain the clear narrative impulse that many of her New Dance Group colleagues carried. She took an immense number of notes on characteristics of different dance techniques. In her notes for the techniques of dancers who used narrative content, such as Pearl Primus in the early to mid-1940s, though, Erdman remained focused on technical mechanics, not on interpretation.[447] In this way, she could be understood as closer to Campbell and his call for medium specificity than to New Dance Group and its preference for representational content. However, an assumption that Erdman only cared about movement

---

[446] "Program from Jean Erdman and Merce Cunningham in Dance Recital at The Arts Club of Chicago," 1943, John Cage Collection, Northwestern University Special Collections. Erdman's colleague and early collaborator Cunningham also used evocative titles for his early dances. For example, at their shared 1942 concert at the Arts Club of Chicago, he named his solos *In the Name of the Holocaust*, *Shimmera*, and *Totem Ancestor*.

[447] Jean Erdman, "Erdman Notebooks 1944-1947," 1947 1944, Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Both Erdman and Primus taught in the "ethnic dance" division of New Dance Group's school. Erdman taught hula and Primus taught "Primitive dance." Erdman's archival collection contains many notes on Primus's technique and classes.

neglected the ways in which she supported, usually women-centered, allusions in her dances. This attention to women and the complexity of female-identifying subjectivities placed her more in alignment with New Dance Group's consideration of identity representation than to formalist abstraction. Crucially, Erdman combined aspects of both approaches to dance. She began with abstract movement exploration and then furthered that exploration by attending to meanings made manifest in the movement. As she explained her approach to her 1940s work in an interview:

> I'd work in the studio also to find movements that I liked. … And to find those movements then expressed before I'd show them to Joe [Campbell] or to some friends that I thought would tell me what they thought. And then evolve from there into a more specific image. Sometimes I would start with a feeling and then find the movement that would express that and then build the style.[448]

In Erdman's approach, a phrase of movement could first be improvised or choreographed based on an initial feeling. Next, meanings that seemed to arise from that dance could be taken into account. Finally, the dance could be refined, as typical in any rehearsal process, with those meanings in mind. The movement, though, came first and dictated further actions.

An analysis of Erdman's *Transformations of Medusa* (1942), *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle* (1945), *Ophelia* (1946), and *Hamadryad* (1948) allows for an interrogation of the relationship between evocation of meaning and formalist abstraction. It also illuminates how Erdman choreographed commentary on gender in such a way that foregrounded movement

[448] Jean Erdman, Publicity Interviews, 1974 by Charles Olsen, interview by Charles Olsen, 1974, Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

technique instead of representation. These four works were the most commonly performed and reviewed staples of Erdman's repertoire. They also most significantly emphasized gendered complexities. Their titles promoted expectations of textual content by referencing mythology or literature. When these titles were taken in tandem with apparently abstract movement, critics complained that Erdman's work was too opaque. Critics expected narrative or textual representation, especially given her success in Graham's theatrical works, and were reticent to count her as part of the decade's wave of (predominantly male) formalist abstract choreographers. Taken together, *Transformations of Medusa*, *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle*, *Ophelia*, and *Hamadryad* reveal a mode of formalist abstraction that allowed, and developed, women-centered meanings.

***Transformations of Medusa* (1942)**

Figure 1: Jean Erdman in *Transformations of Medusa*, 1942. Photographer: Barbara Morgan. Joseph Campbell Foundation.

Transformations of Medusa explored two-dimensional dance and the metamorphosis of one fanatically engaged in such movement (Figure 1). Erdman began work on the piece as an

exercise for the “Archaic” unit of Horst’s composition course, a class also taken by many of Erdman’s contemporaries.[449] True to her choreographic process, though, it did not begin as a contemplation on Medusa. Rather, the final work’s more than one-year long creation process started with a question about movement. The presence of Medusa, with her hair of snakes and ability to turn those who looked at her into stone, materialized after Erdman found a particular movement vocabulary. She recalled, “I wanted to know what the reason would be for moving in that restricted [two-dimensional] style. So I began to explore what kind of person would move like that.”[450] She fueled her practice and analysis of this movement style with Erik Satie’s *Gymnopédie*.[451] Early choreographic notes on this archaic exercise focused on sustained movement over multiple bars of Satie’s score.[452] Erdman marked when her choreography changed direction or stayed in place as well as a climactic moment when she lowered her plane to a kneeling position.[453] The exact steps, though, were not written as they were for her other dances. Directionality functioned as a key element of the dance and the steps came second. These notes resonated with Erdman’s description of her findings from what would become *Transformations of Medusa*’s two-dimensional movement. She answered her guiding question with: “to me it was a fanatic, someone who saw things only one way; no other possible directions.”[454] After seeing this first section of the dance near completion, Horst wrote the ten-minute score for it and Campbell suggested the dance’s resemblance to Medusa. From there,

[449] Jean Erdman, “Erdman Comments for Dances on Video,” n.d., Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
[450] Ibid.
[451] Ibid.
[452] Jean Erdman, “Erdman Early Notebooks,” n.d., Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
[453] Ibid.
[454] Erdman, “Erdman Comments for Dances on Video.”

Erdman worked on it for a year while also keeping vase paintings of Medusa in mind. As she developed her take on Medusa, the complexity of her choreography increased. Rather than use representational tactics to tell the story of her character, inherent qualities of her chosen movements resonated with the complexity of the character in Erdman's eyes. As she explained, "every element of this dance, the rhythms, the use of space, the body postures, the shaping of the hands, the use of the hair and the costume was explored and carefully considered so that every aesthetic element was expressive of the nature of the theme."[455] A focus on movement localized to specific quadrants of the body as a means through which to convey authority and power even when stuck in a limited mode of expression was one result of her arduous process.

Horst's sparse, ominous piano score sounds as Erdman stands in profile to begin the first of the work's three sections, "Temple Virgin."[456] With her arms bent at the elbow in front of her in a scissor shape and her downstage foot slightly in front of her upstage one, she rocks her weight forwards and backwards. Her rocking eventually produces enough momentum to carry her downstage foot and arm behind her. Erdman takes on new two-dimensional shapes with angles of her arms and legs accentuating the four quadrants of her body as moving in distinct rhythms.[457] Her body achieves a degree of freedom in its confinement by producing surprising positions and dynamic movement. A costume designed by Charlotte Trowbridge, including a long grey skirt, red top, and headdress that evokes a crown of snakes, contributes to a stately,

---

[455] Ibid.

[456] Jean Erdman, *Dance & Myth - The World of Jean Erdman Part 1: The Early Dances*, 1998. In addition to Erdman's writings, personal correspondence with Nancy Allison, and reviews, video from *Dance & Myth – The World of Jean Erdman Part 1: The Early Dances* provides key data for my descriptions of *Transformations of Medusa*, *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle*, *Ophelia*, and *Hamadryad.*

[457] Nancy Allison, personal correspondence with author, August 18, 2021. Allison explained the difficulty of performing the numerous sections of *Transformations of Medusa* in which each quadrant of the body executes a distinct movement to a different rhythm.

authoritative effect of Erdman's dance.[458] A motif of alternating between stamping her foot on the floor and then tapping her heel down repeats in various of Erdman's positions. This step's insistence fosters a sense of intentional persistence within its spatial limitations. Erdman exits the stage in a slow walk with each part of her foot articulated as it makes its way to the floor for every step. "Temple Virgin" shows a woman both caught in her frame and unrestrained as she finds ways to move within that context.

In the next section of *Transformations of Medusa*, "Lady of the Wild Thing," Erdman's journey in the limits of two-dimensional movement and the person who would use it picks up energy. She takes her ninety-degree angled arm and leg movements into the air with gliding runs that burst into jumps. Even in calmer moments of the solo, she gathers energy inwards only to take off again in intractable, yet dimensionally contained, dance. The increase in speed and size of Erdman's motions creates a tension between their alacrity and limited space. This pull is heightened by the fixity of Erdman's gaze as her head turns abruptly from one direction to another as though her eye line operates as a field of movement distinct from her body's four quadrants. The music's rising tempo heightens the unique rhythms of her body's quadrants. Erdman seems overtaken by the movement in ways that faintly echo how Medusa might have been overtaken by the power of her gaze. However, any narrative-based interpretations stem from the dance steps as dance steps, not dance steps as narrative depiction. As Erdman explains the tension in this piece, "the idea of someone possessed is someone without full articulation of direction. It's like one-pointed, something that just goes <u>that way</u> at something. So, this distortion

---

[458] Jean Erdman, "Erdman Pocket Notebooks 1938-1945," 1938-1945, Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts; "Jean Erdman Professional Records," n.d., Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

was to create the tension of that kind of possession."[459] The distortion of her body into separate quadrants creates a friction that refuses a singular sense of direction, a result that resonates with Medusa in a non-literal, but evocative way. The fanatical or possessed qualities of which Erdman speaks when explaining *Transformations of Medusa* come through in the dance as an intense focus on movement in relation to the body. Her Medusa lacks any of the possible tragic implications of the Greek myth. Instead, she gathers power as the three sections progress and her devotion to her quadrants' motions increases. Similar to how Erdman allowed for interpretations, images, or inspirations to arise from the movement itself, her dance in *Transformations of Medusa* produces a sense of power.

The last section of the work, "Queen of Gorgons," completes a transformation in which the power of the two-dimensional dance engages in a negotiation of power with the dancer. Erdman crosses the stage horizon three times in a phrase of brushing one leg high to the side and then falling onto that working leg as she descends into a balletic grande plié in second position. Although her large, heavy movements in a confined directional path seem to dictate how Erdman can function, her negotiation of multiple rhythms challenges that power by exhibiting an ability to manage all quadrants of her body. A friction between the agency of the movement and that of the mover comes to a head in this section. Erdman no longer wears her snake headpiece, contributing to the climactic ethos of this final section. Her beating heel motif returns, but in a larger way, as it appears almost as a run in place instead of the first section's slight tapping. The solo, and the entire work, concludes as Erdman travels backwards, picking up one foot at a time and raising its opposite arm at ninety-degree angles. There is no clear resolution. Rather, it

[459] Erdman, Publicity Interviews, 1974 by Charles Olsen [emphasis in original].

appears as though the dance continues beyond what the audience can see. Erdman's continuing movement dictates the duration of the dance and the ways in which meaning can be made from it.

Erdman's dance troubled a continuum between theatricalism and formalist abstraction. Critics appreciated her technical mastery, but their reviews attempted to fit her into frameworks for theatrical representation of characters. When judged by that criterion, her work and its primacy of movement exploration did not make sense. As one *Dance Observer* critic noted, "*Transformations of Medusa* is a beautifully wrought dance. However, a program note would help to give the audience an historical and artistic insight into the subject matter."[460] This review did not allow the idea that a dance could evoke, or invoke, a given image without actually being about that image in a literal way. Another critic for the publication wrote that the dance "had power and intensity, but one wonders why [Erdman] chose such an intellectual source when the things she wished to say could have been expressed in terms of a character that the audience would have had much more ease in identifying."[461] Greek myth and literary references on the concert stage were not new with *Transformations of Medusa*. This critic's question could be read as a wish for presentation of a more quotidian character, such as that used in socialist realist works of the late 1930s and early 1940s. However, that take on *Transformations of Medusa* implied that the work was intended to be representational. Neither of these *Dance Observer* reviews afforded Erdman the opportunity to be understood within a framework of formalist abstraction.

---

[460] Eleanor Goff, "New Dance Group Festival," *Dance Observer* 12, no. 7 (August-September 1945): 85.
[461] Horton Foote, "Jean Erdman and Marie Marchowsky," *Dance Observer* 12, no. 3 (March 1945): 33.

The title Erdman chose for *Transformations of Medusa*, as well as for much of the rest of her 1940s repertoire, could be considered as a reason for critics' work to position her within a theatrical frame of interpretation. However, the gendered dynamics of those categorizations also surfaced in crucial ways. For instance, when reviewing *Transformations of Medusa* in 1945, Edwin Denby of the *New York Herald Tribune* interpreted the piece in accordance with what he saw as gender-appropriate behavior for Erdman. He remarked, "a piece about the Medusa looked almost collegiate in its timidity; and it wasn't till after two numbers that her body lost a sort of girdled decorum in the bustle, charming in a lady but not in a dancer."[462] Denby saw the intense power of "Queen of Gorgons" as exhibiting a sexualized energy that contrasted with a more serious and intellectual one of the prior two sections. His disregard for the "collegiate" approach of "Temple Virgin" and "Lady of the Wild Thing" resonated with many other (usually male) critics' writings on Erdman.[463] For example, in 1947 Ezra Goodman complained in *Dance Magazine* after mentioning the title of *Transformations of Medusa* that "pretentious is probably a good word to describe Miss Erdman too. It is not so much that her art is primarily intellectual, but that it smacks of the esoteric and pseudo-aesthetic."[464] This kind of characterization of Erdman ran consistently in reviews of her work during the 1940s. Whereas her friend and previous collaborator Cunningham was beginning to receive recognition for his abstract dances as movement for the sake of movement without much attention to their titles, she was seen as inauthentic in the intellectual labor of her work. Her medium specificity was not taken as such. Her work's lack of clear connection to her dance's titles, based on meanings that she saw as

---

[462] Edwin Denby, "Debut Dance Recital," *New York Herald Tribune*, February 11, 1945.
[463] Campbell, "Betwixt the Cup and the Lip."
[464] Ezra Goodman, "Nights Out: The Moderns: Limon, Fonaroff, Mata and Hari; the Jooss Ballet and a Number of New Musicals," *Dance Magazine*, February 1947.

coming from the movement itself, counted for critics as evidence that her work did not actually contain intellectual rigor.

In *Transformations of Medusa*, Erdman found two-dimensional movement and pushed the limits of what that movement could be through dynamic changes in energy, range of motion, and use of gaze. The fanatical person with only a single direction she found through that dance exploration surfaced as Medusa for Campbell. Upon this revelation, Erdman's further research and rehearsal provided additional facets to the dance. Crucially, as in all of her work, meanings were not layered onto existing choreography. Rather, she allowed for interpretation of her movement and then used subtle meanings or resonances found from that interpretation as part of her artistic process. *Transformations of Medusa*'s focal point was dance within the confines of a two-dimensional pathway. However, Erdman's use of gaze in relation to the quadrants of her body set up a power dynamic of her body in relation to her movement. In so doing, she excised any tragic connotations of Medusa's story as a cursed gorgon. The body quadrants moving distinctly with separate rhythms also evoked a sense of complex agency for Erdman's Medusa. This dance did not align with conventions for character representation on the modern dance stage. It failed, therefore, when judged according to theatrical conventions. The gendered connotations of critics' interpretations of the dance and what they deemed to be Erdman's inauthentic intellectualism heightened in her trio *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle*.

***Daughters of the Lonesome Isle* (1945)**

Figure 2: Reconstruction of *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle* (Nancy Allison in front). Photographer: Lois Greenfield. Jean Erdman Dance.

Erdman began work on her 1945 *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle* with an image of a women-only world in mind (Figure 2). As she explained, "the image I started with was the ancient triple goddess. My feeling was of the female world itself without the male, so that it's incomplete and yet complete. It thinks it's complete, but it's incomplete, because it's waiting for the male."[465] This sentiment of women waiting echoed those expressed in the wartime and immediate postwar works on women, loss, and loneliness by Primus and Eve Gentry. Interestingly, both in her description of the work and its choreography, Erdman resisted a sense of incompleteness in her women-only world. When further elaborating on her initial idea for the work, she explained, "even before I ever heard the word feminist, I guess I was one. […] I became fascinated with the idea of the female just by herself—the female without the male—what was this quality? What was this essence?"[466] Each of the trio's women stands for a particular time in a woman's life: youth; a creative mother; and a woman of experience who was

[465] Erdman, Publicity Interviews, 1974 by Charles Olsen.
[466] Erdman, "Erdman Comments for Dances on Video."

not a mother.[467] Erdman's contemporaries who also created dances on themes of women waiting for men during the war captured experiences of women around their ages in their twenties or thirties. Erdman's inclusion, and choreographic emphasis on, a female elder without children challenged modern dance's common way of minimizing older women as well as societal conventions of assuming it necessary for women to be mothers, which Erdman was not.

True to Erdman's process, *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle* might have had a clear vision behind it, but it did not involve narrative representation to serve a story. Instead, the movement came out of Erdman's improvisation while "simply thinking about this goddess idea. I wanted to explore the different stages and ages of woman."[468] It was then accompanied by a prepared piano score Cage created for it.[469] Of course, Erdman's exploration of women was bound to her experience as a socioeconomically privileged white woman as well as her studies of myth and matriarchal societies. Crucially, she did not purport her work to capture a universal experience of womanhood. Instead, she viewed it as an exploration, or a study in-process. It is also important to note that while the work could be taken at first glance as imposing a strict gender binary, Erdman was specifically not interested in her woman in relation to another gender or an essential idea of female identity. When Allison pressed Erdman in 1988 on how the dance spoke to their late 1980s moment with its greater allowance of gender fluidity, Erdman responded that she wanted to express aspects of a "single woman" with youth, mothering or nourishing, and aged

---

[467]Jean Erdman, "The Dance as Non-Verbal Poetic Image, Part I," *Dance Observer* 16, no. 4 (April 1949): 49; Erdman, "Erdman Comments for Dances on Video"; Jean Erdman, The Jean Erdman Video Project Transcript: Conversation with Nancy Allison, interview by Nancy Allison, March 20, 1988, Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

[468] Erdman, "Erdman Comments for Dances on Video."

[469] Erdman, "Erdman Comments for Dances on Video"; Cage's scores for Erdman's dances are published and publicly accessible.

experience without motherhood all inside of her.[470] In other words, she sought to interrogate a world of only women through different aspects of a particular woman's life as manifested through movement, not to represent specific subjectivities in a universalizing or exclusionary way. Common to much of Erdman's 1940s women-centric repertoire, she did not seek to define certain stories or experiences as much as to ask and notice through dance what elements of those experiences might be. *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle* exemplified her way of centering women, or feminism as she might say, within abstract movement exploration.

The trio of women, including Erdman, of *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle* maintains a light and energetic quality throughout ten minutes of complex phrases of virtuosic jumps, leg extensions, and snaking hip or shoulder movements.[471] The women begin facing out of a circle, holding hands with one another.[472] They break out of the circle and dance in a slow, rhythmically- complex tempo with "no real progression."[473] Each woman has a distinct movement theme, which she performs by herself. When they dance together, they shift in and out of various triangular or circular patterns that accentuate a different woman or aspect of her life experience. The dance uses a highly technical movement vocabulary, including modern dance, ballet, hula, and elements of dance from Pacific Islands that Erdman experienced in Hawaii or on travels. Overall, the women continually use sweeping motions, as though blown by a breeze or by Cage's complex prepared piano score. For example, towards the middle of the work, the women move in a triangular formation for a repeating phrase in which they brush a leg high to the side and carry it forward in a reverse fan shape. Their brushed leg reaches the floor only to go

---

[470] Erdman, The Jean Erdman Video Project Transcript: Conversation with Nancy Allison.
[471] "Jean Erdman Professional Records."
[472] Erdman, "The Dance as Non-Verbal Poetic Image, Part I," 49.
[473] Ibid.

straight into a grapevine step and then into a gliding triplet catch step traveling forward.[474] Each brush of their legs brings them to face a new direction. Their arms echo their steps in curved and sweeping motions. The dancers' continual, often curved or snaking, motion results in an effect that there are no clear beginnings or ends.

Erdman differentiates the women not only through their movement themes, solos, and spacing techniques, but also through musical tactics. Her choreographic notes reveal meticulous counts in relation to the music Cage had composed for the dance after its completion.[475] For example, the youthful woman dances at one point two counts ahead of the creative mother and the woman of experience, divulging her naïve eagerness. Even though the youthful woman, the creative mothering woman, and the woman of experience perform their own themes and solos while the other two maintain a group dance, they are all bound together in a shared movement style and intricate rhythm. These different themes work together "and the way they affect each other is the 'action.'"[476] The dance ends with the women in their opening circle pose. This return to the beginning supports Erdman's intention for the piece to contain no progress.[477] The dance resists heteronormative notions of aging based on linear progress through time and biological reproduction akin to what queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman refers to as "chrononormativity, or the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity."[478] By choreographing the dance with the women beginning and ending in the same place without changing or maturing as well as by positioning the nurturing mother and woman of experience

---

[474] Jean Erdman, "Production Materials-Early Works, Daughters of the Lonesome Isle-Ideas, Choreography Notes," n.d., Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
[475] Ibid.
[476] Erdman, "The Dance as Non-Verbal Poetic Image, Part I," 49.
[477] Ibid.
[478] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

outside of biological definitions of mothering, Erdman positions her women in a time and space resonant with what queer theorist Jack Halberstam refers to as "queer time and space." As Halberstam explains, "queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction."[479] Erdman shows women moving through a women-centric, queer temporality that holds no consideration of heteronormative practices of orienting a woman's life stages in relation to reproduction.

Although Erdman imagined a world in which a woman could live only in relation to herself, existing in what could be understood as queer time and space, the choreography had a flirtatious, sexual quality. The three women share a swirly movement vocabulary filled with "hip swaying," "hip roll[s]," "drip ripple[s]," and moments to "wave body."[480] These motions were accentuated by the costumes that Erdman designed. As she explained, "I even created the costume design before I started the choreography. We had hip level skirts with big side bustles sticking out, a pleated skirt and a sheer overskirt, darker color tubing and two around the bosom, so that the breasts and hips were accentuated and the movement I made would take the costume shape into account."[481] By starting her choreographic process with this costume shape and the idea of a women-only world, Erdman created movement that operated in a queerly sexual way. When further discussing the dance and its costumes, though, she complicated ideas of the dance as sexual. She remarked, "there is nothing really sexy about that dance, and yet the costumes are quite sexy."[482] This nuance stemmed from the intersection of how her choreography worked with

[479] J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 1.
[480] Erdman, "The Dance as Non-Verbal Poetic Image, Part I," 49.
[481] Erdman, Publicity Interviews, 1974 by Charles Olsen.
[482] Erdman, The Jean Erdman Video Project Transcript: Conversation with Nancy Allison.

its costumes and Erdman's focus on women existing free from men and away from heteronormative expectations for women.

Each of the three women evoked an aspect of a single woman's life. The presence of both the mothering woman and the woman of experience, who never had children, placed the women into queer time and space as defined by Halberstam. In this temporality and spatiality, the mothering woman could be considered as engaged in not only parenting of her own children, but also in a more general mode of caregiving for herself and the women around her. *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle* resonated with what dance scholar Clare Croft defined as queer dance's "challenge to social norms" and mode of centering "women and feminism."[483] The piece both boldly challenged heteronormativity and, due to its easily sexualized costumes and abstract movement made to fit them, could be taken as maintaining a status quo of women's performance for men's pleasure. As Croft wrote about queer dance, it is "at once legible, but also refusing exact referent, at once overwhelming and unmarked."[484] Erdman did not explain her dance in queer terms when it premiered in 1945, unsurprising given that moment's place in the very beginning of the Cold War and Lavender Scare. When Allison, who had danced in the piece many times, questioned Erdman about it in terms of their then-contemporary 1988 politics of gender fluidity, both women saw it as still resonant to women in their new era of "much more give and take [of gender] in the open."[485] The dance contained a queer possibility for women in both subtle and obvious ways. Erdman's reliance on abstract movement exploration, rather than

[483] Clare Croft, "Introduction," in *Queer Dance: Meanings and Makings*, ed. Clare Croft (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2-3.
[484] Ibid., 11.
[485] Erdman, The Jean Erdman Video Project Transcript: Conversation with Nancy Allison.

representational dance, allowed for a multiplicity of meanings for her work in terms of a woman's gender and sexuality.

Critical reception of *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle* evidences interpretations of it as abstract, pleasurable to view, and distinctly of some other world. Doris Hering wrote in *Dance Magazine* that the piece "was a strangely compelling atmosphere piece. Both the movement and the music gave the impression of floating through a sort of nebulous other-world, the non-objective, non-representational world that has preoccupied so many artists, but rarely with the success achieved by Miss Erdman."[486] Hering used a common interpretation of the trio as otherworldly to explain its use of formalist abstraction with a touch of evocative imagery setting it apart from fully "objective" dance. The piece's lack of progression and of representation worked, for Hering, to promote an ambiguous atmosphere. Whereas she accepted the piece as non-representational and non-objective, other critics attempted to interpret the dance's ambiguous otherworldliness as part of its title. Walter Terry of *New York Herald Tribune* surmised:

> [*Daughters of the Lonesome Isle*] has no literal meaning, no plot, no specific characterizations, but one senses in the choreographic contacts of the three girls the implications in "daughters"; in the patterns which lead the figures from a small circle to what appears to be a definite periphery and back again, the word "isle," and in the

[486] Doris Hering, "The Moderns in Concert," *Dance Magazine*, February 1946, 43.

> drifting quality of the movement, the word "lonesome." It is a beautiful dance, no more difficult to understand than the beauty of moonlight on water but as difficult to explain.[487]

Terry identified correlations between aspects of the dance and its title. The futility of this attempt, though, is clarified in his final note on how the piece was difficult to explain. Interestingly, he both acknowledged and refused *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle*'s lack of literal meaning. He began his review with an assertion of it as meaningless, but then attempted to find meaning in an extremely literal way. Like numerous others of Erdman's critics, Terry would not allow full interpretation of her within a framework of formalist abstraction. However, like recent revisionary scholarship has clarified on Cunningham, her dances were overflowing with meanings in unconventional ways. Although Terry's review could be read as contributing to the gendered gate-keeping of formalist abstraction beginning in the mid-1940s, it also could be seen as an early grappling with the meaning beyond representational dance in that genre.

Daughters of the Lonesome Isle resonated with Erdman's contemporaries' dances on themes of loneliness and women or widows waiting for men at war, such as those of Gentry and Primus. However, critics did not draw any connections between the piece to its end-of-war context or those other works. Critics might not have noticed or placed importance on those connections. Or, perhaps Erdman's overt attention to a woman's identity apart from men, or the queer resonances of the work, rendered it inefficacious for critics to write about in that way. Denby noted the work's sexual undertones and interpreted it as overall abstract and pleasurable. He described:

---

[487] Walter Terry, "Contributions of Two Young Modern Dancers: Dance Satirists," *New York Herald Tribune*, December 15, 1946.

> [*Daughters of the Lonesome Isle*], in which three young women swayed their hips and made snaky movements with their arms, waited in a straddle…fascinated and delighted me. Whatever the piece was meant to mean, there was a lightness in the rhythm, a quality of generosity and spaciousness in the movement that struck me as the content of a dance should, as a poetic presence.[488]

For Denby, the movement provided his positive spectatorial experience and any meanings were secondary to that vision of movement. The discrepancies between Erdman's and critics' descriptions of the piece pointed to some of the complexities of her mode of formalist abstraction. Critics, such as Terry, sought to fit her into theatrical conventions for representation and, thereby took part in the growing gendered divide between theatricalism and formalist abstraction. At the same time, others, such as Denby, embraced Erdman's lack of clear narrative in ways that also allowed an elision of potentially subversive aspects of her work. With her basis as movement exploration with an idea of women apart from men, Erdman crafted *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle* in such a way that supported interpretations of it as both meaningful and untethered to meaning. Critics' consistent references to it as another world, beauty apart from plot, or related to its title in a shallow way enabled an excision of Erdman's nuanced consideration of gender and sexuality as well as its relation to those of her contemporaries.

Whereas critics disavowed *Transformation of Medusa*'s lack of resemblance to its titular myth, they did not seek a narrative reference point for *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle*. Instead, they interpreted it as not only non-representational, but also unrealistic and as taking place in a nebulous other world. This summary of the dance rendered Erdman's meditation on a place of

[488] Edwin Denby, "Debut Dance Recital," *New York Herald Tribune*, February 11, 1945.

only women as distant and unthreatening to heteronormative conventions. Reviews evidenced that critics understood the dance's basic premise of an island without men from its title even without knowing her detailed thought processes that went into the dance. Erdman's three women demonstrated queer resonances in their abilities to nourish themselves and others in generative ways apart from heteronormative definitions of mothering, aging, or progression part and parcel of chrononormativity. In this way, she centered women in her abstract movement exploration while also alluding to modes of agency that could be exercised not in relation to another person. The ideas of a singular woman's agency as found through movement in conversation with an image continued in her *Ophelia*.

***Ophelia* (1946)**

Figure 3: Erdman in *Ophelia*. White Barn Theater.

Erdman's 1946 *Ophelia* stands as one of the most representational works of her 1940s repertoire, though not in terms of a literal representation of the piece's namesake. In the seven-minute solo set to a piano score by Cage, Erdman uses sudden directional changes to convey a

woman caught in a push and pull of a major decision. Her billowing white dress with red painted nerve endings designed by Xenia Cage adds emphasis as her leg sweeps in a fan kick, attempting to pull her body stage right, as her gaze and torso fight to remain in stage left throughout multiple sections of the piece (Figure 3). The music's urgent, repetitive striking of a contained melody line contributes to the dance's gravity. After several repeated phrases of her fan kick tug-of-war towards the middle of the work, Erdman attempts to walk in a determined way upstage only to be pulled downstage and into a lunging position. She is at a "threshold" between "phases of human life," "one of those moments when everything that had existed has got to go and everything that's coming has got to be found."[489] She continues this push and pull towards stage right. She gains no reprieve from this struggle as nearly every line of her choreographic notes for the piece includes a turn.[490] As the solo continues in this torn manner, it becomes clear that the forces propelling Erdman forward or reeling her backward come from within her. Torso contractions often ignite her sudden changes in direction, conveying an internal power controlling those decisions. In other words, the movement itself dictates her exploration of space and progress on the dance's journey. This internal quality does not make the struggle any less severe. Erdman' choreography "explore[s] what happens to someone who cannot cross the threshold: when one has a life experience that is so terrifying that it cannot be integrated into the psyche, but leads to total dismemberment."[491] Unlike the tragic fate of the dancer's namesake in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Erdman's body is impacted by its internally-ignited movement, not external people or situations. She enacts an internal confrontation with a life threshold

[489] Erdman, "Erdman Comments for Dances on Video."
[490] Erdman, "Erdman Notebooks 1944-1947."
[491] Erdman, "Erdman Comments for Dances on Video."

through abstract movement exploration. The piece ends with a black out as Erdman hinges into a kneeling position. The stage is fully darkened before the audience can get a clear sense of resolution.

In *Ophelia*, Erdman resisted both heroic triumph and tragic failure. Instead, she focused on a process of internal struggle and interrogation of one's own multi-faceted subjectivity. She crafted the solo while Campbell wrote his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, a theoretical analysis of mythic heroes' journeys.[492] Erdman took the idea of a hero journey as her starting image and found movement in relation to it. Similar to her enactment of queer time in resistance to heteronormative progress in *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle*, though, she moved away from heroic success or conventions for productivity. Instead, she danced an analysis of when someone on a hero journey chose to fail to answer her call. As Allison explained it, Erdman enacted a woman battling her "internal dragons" and, ultimately, turning away from her call to heroic triumph.[493] Similar to the process of many of Erdman's dances, *Ophelia*'s name came after its choreography and greatly impacted critics' interpretations of it. She showed the piece to Campbell and he suggested "it's Ophelia."[494] Although the Shakespearean reference inspired some of Erdman's movement at the end of the piece when she failed to follow a heroic path through a life threshold, she did not attempt to literally represent the story of *Hamlet*.[495] Movement found with an image in mind gave rise to the piece and Campbell's interpretation of

---

[492] Ibid.
[493] Allison, personal correspondence with author.
[494] Erdman, "Erdman Comments for Dances on Video."
[495] Ibid.

that abstract dance as in line with *Ophelia* provided additional nuance, but not a narrative to be communicated.

Critics identified an emotional quality to *Ophelia* that separated it from Erdman's other dances' emphasis on movement. Terry related the piece's dynamics to "its revelations of a tragic figure, sometimes gentle, sometimes fierce."[496] He implied a definition of the dance as a character study of Ophelia. Nik Krevitsky of *Dance Observer* similarly viewed the solo in relation to a study in drama. He admired the emotionality conveyed in the solo's torn movement, but wished for more theatrical character representation. He characterized *Ophelia* as Erdman's "only dramatic dance."[497] As he explained:

> [*Ophelia*] is the only dance [of Erdman's repertoire] in which the performer allows herself an expression in movements of passion, of pure basic *human* emotion. This is not an implication that we would like to see the same in the other dances; they are not suited to such emotion. But it is a plea for more seeking, more searching into material through which she could give other warm, poignant, dramatic portrayals.[498]

Krevitsky's hope for Erdman to choreograph more "dramatic portrayals" signaled that he interpreted *Ophelia* to be about the titular character and hoped for her to continue in that assumed direction of text-based theatricalism. His emphasis on "human" separated the piece from *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle*, which featured some shared movement vocabulary (sweeping leg extensions and swift changes in direction) with *Ophelia*, but was consistently

---

[496] Terry, "Contributions of Two Young Modern Dancers."
[497] Nik Krevitsky, "Jean Erdman and Dance Company," *Dance Observer* 16, no. 3 (March 1949): 36.
[498] Ibid. [emphasis in original.]

interpreted as otherworldly. Despite Krevitsky's convictions, *Ophelia* was not choreographically very different from the rest of Erdman's repertoire during the 1940s. It stood apart from the rest in its title's reference to a well-known literary character. Whereas Medusa of *Transformations of Medusa* carried a bit more ambiguity due to the manifold ways Greek myth had been interpreted in different arts forms, *Ophelia* could be linked to a distinct play text with a clear story. Krevitsky's review attempted to push Erdman towards theatricalism and away from the formalist abstraction that was undeniable in much of her repertoire.

In contrast to critics' attempts to place Erdman and, especially, *Ophelia* within theatrical frameworks, she published writings on dance as an autonomous art form (or, absolute dance) and its distance from theatre or theatrical dance techniques such as text or representation. Erdman's absolute dance stance was not only an aesthetic philosophy. It also separated her from the growing field of modern dancers on the Broadway stage. In the mid- to late 1940s, formalist abstraction increasingly became an area dominated by male choreographers. As female choreographers transitioned to Broadway, those remaining in modern dance, such as Erdman, needed to demarcate their dance as entirely separate from the theatricalism of musical theatre. In 1948, Erdman wrote an essay defining modern dance and tracing its history for *Vassar Alumnae Magazine*. In this aptly titled "What is Modern Dance?" she argued that "dance on the concert stage is a totally independent art, complete in itself, not leaning upon some other medium of expression for its *raison d'etre*."[499] Dance, for Erdman, was complete without meaning, text, or even music. Although her use of complex rhythms might have made her allowance for dance on its own without reliance on music surprising, she often choreographed her dances before

[499] Jean Erdman, "What Is Modern Dance?," *Vassar Alumnae Magazine*, February 1948, 19 [emphasis in original].

commissioning scores for them or finalizing her music selection. In other words, the music served the dance already complete in itself. She went on to juxtapose concert dance with dance in musical revues. In so doing, she implied a distinction between modern dance on the concert stage and on Broadway, an urgent concern for modern dance and its weakening financial status, as discussed in this dissertation's Introduction and previous chapter.[500] More than concern for financial issues, though, she stressed the importance of modern dance as an absolute art form that ought not to try to emulate another. She could take this strong stance for medium specificity in opposition to musicals because she had financial support from her husband, unlike many of the modern dancers who went to Broadway in hopes of more financially-viable opportunities.

Erdman furthered this juxtaposition of dance and modes of theatre in an article she contributed to *Dance Observer* the same year by even more explicitly writing against representation in dance. She explained that although one could draw upon dramatic elements for a dance, "if the piece is to remain a dance and not become a dumb-show or play without words, the dramatic elements will have to be reduced to dance motifs and fused to a lyric, rhythmic base significantly concordant with the dramatic theme."[501] In this formulation, the choreographer would take her, for instance, narrative inspiration and compose movement phrases that could pair with music in such a way that would elide direct narrative representation while offering fidelity to that narrative's overall theme. In other words, that choreographer would need to abstract her narrative source into essential themes or feelings of it, not specific stories from it. Erdman continued writing in this line of argumentation the following year for *Dance Observer* with her

[500] Ibid
[501] Jean Erdman, "Young Dancers State Their Views: As Told to Joseph Campbell," *Dance Observer* 15, no. 4 (April 1948): 41.

two-part article "The Dance as Non-Verbal Poetic Image." Here, she argued that dance should evoke "potentialities and aspects of man that are antecedent to words, antecedent even to the spheres of personal recollection, and constitute the primary heritage of the embodied human spirit."[502] In many ways, this assertion harkened back to John Martin's early theorizations of modern dance that posed it as absolute dance and as able to access a universal field of emotion.[503] Erdman's writings differed from those abstract beginnings of modern dance theory in that she took care to define it in stark contrast to theatricalism. She referred to "literary dance," or dance with narrative or representational content, as "not properly dance at all."[504] Even the use of program notes brought dance too close to theatricalism for Erdman.[505] This remark implied a critique of Graham, for whom Erdman performed various literary-focused roles. Despite this insistence on formalist abstraction in lieu of theatricalism in modern dance, she continued to allow audiences to expect theatrical content due to the titles of her works, such as *Ophelia*.

In the case of *Ophelia*, critics interpreted the dance in accordance with expectations for a theatrical character representation akin to Erdman's famous role of Emily Dickinson in Graham's 1940 *Letter to the World*. They saw it as a move for Erdman in the direction of theatricalism, the aesthetic in which they thought she belonged. In her conceptualization of *Ophelia* and the (lack of) place for text or representation in modern dance, though, Erdman saw the piece as movement that arose from exploration of the idea of one failing to cross a threshold or answer a heroic call. Her complex choreography led critics to find the piece as intensely emotional, a trait they linked to theatricalism in implicit contrast to the purportedly

---

[502] Jean Erdman, "The Dance as Non-Verbal Poetic Image, Part I," *Dance Observer* 16, no. 4 (April 1949): 48.
[503] Martin, *The Modern Dance*.
[504] Ibid.
[505] Ibid.

depersonalized work of Cunningham. Erdman also troubled ideas of the dance's titular woman as tragic. Her woman in the piece (Ophelia or not) distinctly chose to fail. Her powerful movement conveyed that she could have answered the call to herodom on the other side of a threshold if she had wanted to, but she opted to follow another path. In *Ophelia*, Erdman danced an internal struggle that minimized the forces of an external world on her, similar to the case of *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle.* This idea of a woman as complete in herself and not in relation to another came across to one critic in a clipping Erdman saved from *The New Republic*. This writer assessed of all Erdman's repertoire, "the fictive personality [she] employs is that of the female locked in utter isolation from the world, locked into herself by an androgynous conflict."[506] Erdman's movement explorations conveyed a distinct sense of a woman in relation to no one and nothing but herself due to a queerly gendered crisis. Freeman has written that "'timing' engenders a sense of being and belonging that feels natural."[507] In refusing the forward-marching timing of a hero journey, Erdman complicates the collective productivity of chrononormativity. Even after she added an ending to *Ophelia* with Shakespeare's character in mind, the struggles in the dance remained internal, gendered, and in refusal to narrative.

***Hamadryad* (1948)**

In her 1948 *Hamadryad*, Erdman employs medium specificity to circumvent constraints of narrative or progression of time. Instead, the dance "expresses the pleasure of being alive."[508] Her draped green silk dress designed by Roxanne Marden flows in the air as Erdman waves her

---

[506] William Poster, "Dance Festival," *The New Republic*, January 21, 1946, Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
[507] Freeman, *Time Binds*, 18.
[508] Erdman, "Erdman Comments for Dances on Video."

arms like they are blowing in the wind. Claude Debussy's *Syrinx*, a composition for solo flute, provides a delicate background to Erdman's spritely jumps and quick changes from light movement with her gaze upwards to heavy steps done with a contracted torso. Long silences that Erdman added to Debussy's score bring focus entirely to her body and disrupt chrononormative notions of time based on productivity. She reaches a pose with her arms in their billowing position and the music re-starts. The flute serves the movement. As the music comes and goes at the discretion of the dance, a sense of existing outside of temporality arises. There is no clear progression. Erdman's choreography is intensely rhythmical, but does not remain within discrete phrases of music. Other than the piece's title along with its green costume and repeating motif of arms waving as though blowing in a breeze, *Hamadryad* does not evoke any kind of narrative. Similar to *Ophelia*, *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle*, and *Transformations of Medusa*, Erdman appears to be in a world by herself. As her Medusa demonstrates agency within a dance of intensity, her Hamadryad appears completely caught in the acute joy of movement. The musicality of *Hamadryad* furthers that sense of existing with and for only oneself as Erdman's acts of stretching into a pose cause the flute to start or stop.

Hamadryad marked an anomaly from Erdman's repertoire while also continuing key aspects of her aesthetic philosophy. Unusual for her process, she created the piece to an existing score. Post-choreography compositions worked better for her absolute dance sensibility in that the music could be built around the dance and not impact the movement's formation. In order to mitigate the possible infringement of Debussy's flute solo onto her dance, she greatly adjusted the score by stretching its pre-existing pauses and dynamic changes. For example, the long durations of the solo performed in silence were enabled because Erdman lengthened rests in the

composition. As she explained, "I took great liberties in interpreting Debussy's score markings, so that even with an already composed piece I worked with the music as a partner to the dance and didn't have to force a particular dance expression."[509] In this way, she took care to avoid forced expressions, or representations, outside of whatever the movement itself evoked. She achieved the effect of the dance controlling the music by matching her "movements with certain parts of the music, certain beginnings of phrases and so on."[510] By bringing the dance and music together in this intermittent way at the beginnings of musical phrases, she foregrounded an idea of music in service of a dance that could go on without it. She also gelled this anomalous process into her typical focus on dance over music.

Also uncommon for Erdman's repertoire during the 1940s, *Hamadryad* did not contain any sense of transition, journey, or passage of time. Even in *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle*, in which she resisted ideas of progression, a cyclical sense of time was created in her use of circles to begin and end the piece. *Hamadryad* included no clear beginnings or endings. The dance flowed through dynamic changes and musical starts and stops. It did not progress anywhere or circle back to a beginning. When Allison and Erdman discussed the piece, Allison remarked "the only [dance in Erdman's repertoire during the 1940s period] that isn't a spot on the journey, a resting place, is *Hamadryad*."[511] Erdman responded to this assertion, "the *Hamadryad* was just that wonderful paradise of no history at all, just there."[512] This sense of presence for the sake of presence without a history or a place to go in the future spoke to Erdman's emphasis on medium specificity. Movement was enough to create a dance without the aid of music or theatrical

---

[509] Ibid.
[510] Erdman, The Jean Erdman Video Project Transcript: Conversation with Nancy Allison.
[511] Ibid.
[512] Ibid.

elements. Her embodied presence was also enough for the dance without connotations of past or future that could inadvertently create a narrative experience for spectators. In *Hamadryad*'s 1948 context in which men such as Cunningham, Nikolais, and Erick Hawkins were gaining more critical attention, especially for their abstract works, than their female counterparts, Erdman's insistence on the body alongside evocations of femininity in the piece's title caused a centering of gender in her formalist abstract dance.

Krevitsky and Herring used *Hamadryad*'s title to classify it as a "nature dance."[513] This category of dance was assigned by critics to Erdman and Sybil Shearer for their abstract works that evoked imagery of nature through titles or movement interpreted as natural expressions of internal emotions. Interestingly, these nature dances were interpreted as of nature and, therefore, outside of the dancers' individualities while also not depersonalized as the works of many of their male counterparts were considered. As formalist abstraction came to stand for American modern dance as embodied in a (often white) male body, women's interventions in that mode of dance were qualified by critics as expressions of internal emotions or evocative of nature. *Hamadryad*'s reception complicated easy categorizations for critics because its title and green costume, indeed, could be interpreted as nature-inspired, but its mathematic play with the relation between music and dance rendered it much more manipulated than an image of an organic tree nymph.

Critics separated their notes on *Hamadryad*'s complex musicality and its elements of a nature dance. For example, Martin remarked that Erdman "has a wonderful time spacing her

---

[513] Krevitsky, "Jean Erdman and Dance Company"; Doris Hering, "The Season in Review," *Dance Magazine*, July 1948, 10.

phrases against those of the music, and the work and the performance combine in an imaginative evocation of the legendary nymph whose life is identified with that of a particular tree."[514] He saw the choreographic "work" of pacing music with dance as distinct from the "performance" with its green flowing silk dress and a title for the dance. In other words, Martin separated what could be considered as a more formalist abstract mode of making dance from performance elements that could be considered as theatrically conveying an image. In a later review, he similarly separated Erdman's "communication of an image" from her "texture of movement…with music as a contrapuntal element in composition."[515] Krevitsky mentioned the flute as supplying "the proper animal mood," implying the nature element of the dance as coming from the music, not the dance. In breaking apart *Hamadryad* in order to define it as a "nature dance," critics circumvented the piece's formalist abstraction and found ways in which it could be placed into theatrical frameworks for representation of nature imagery.

Similar to *Transformations of Medusa*, *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle*, and *Ophelia*, *Hamadryad* complicated critics' understandings of formalist abstraction and theatrical strategies of representation, narrative, or text-based content. The dance's title and costume enabled critics to place it into the new category of nature dance. Erdman's focus on movement exploration along with her manipulation of music, however, led critics to juxtapose that nature dance assignation with the piece's formal qualities. Her resistance to progression of time or linearity in the dance worked to highlight her embodied presence, or the ways in which she existed onstage at a given moment apart from a past, future, or accompanying meanings. This particular mode of

---

[514] John Martin, "Jean Erdman Seen in 2 Novel Dances: Shares Spotlight of Program with Anthony and Gifford -- 'Champion' is Presented," *New York Times*, May 27, 1948.
[515] John Martin, "The Dance: Surfeit: An Overgenerous Festival by New Dance Group," *New York Times*, June 6, 1948.

embodied presence worked in similar ways to her other dances' acts of presenting a woman in relation to only herself.

Absolute Dance with Possibilities for Meaning

In her 1940s repertoire, especially *Transformations of Medusa*, *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle*, *Ophelia*, and *Hamadryad*, Erdman used aesthetic practices of both modern dance stakeholders pushing for formalist abstraction and her New Dance Group colleagues' allowances for contemplations of identity. She began her choreographic process with an image in mind as she executed movement exploration. As she molded that movement exploration into its final form, input from Campbell and other colleagues contributed the works' titles or other nuances to how they might be interpreted. Erdman's descriptions of her dances as well as her published writings revealed her efforts to not only present her work as absolute dance, but also her desire to set modern dance on the concert stage apart from that of Broadway. On the concert stage, for Erdman, modern dance was premised on medium specificity and free from meaning. She contrasted that with modern dance on the Broadway stage, which she did not see as proper dance, due to its reliance on music, storytelling, or other tenets of theatricalism. Although her stance in many ways went back to early practices and theorizations of modern dance as an absolute art form, it took on new tenors as the 1940s progressed. A political crisis at the onset of the Cold War rendered work purportedly untethered to meaning more efficacious for many in the New York modern dance community, a group that had long been a haven for leftists, communists, and/or queer individuals. At the same time, modern dance's financial crisis reached an intense level of concern as prominent companies disbanded and many female modern dancers

found new homes on Broadway. The act of marking formalist abstraction as the defining quality of American modern dance served both of these streams of concerns.

Erdman's personal unpublished writings demonstrated that she was not nearly as concerned with the political possibilities of dance as her New Dance Group colleagues. Instead, she spent an enormous amount of time and energy writing careful notes on different dance techniques and analyzing the characteristics of those ways of moving. This could be attributed to her personal predilections or Campbell's assertions on how dancers should not engage in political messages. Still, she could not be separated from her contemporary political milieu. Her dances, while ostensibly free from representational meaning, centered women in ways antithetical to formalist abstraction's preference for white male bodies as metonymic of neutrality. In particular, Erdman took care to enact a vision of a singular woman only in relation to herself. The women of her dances did not rely on men, the material world, or even other women. Her use of time and evocations of a lack of progress aided this queerly women-centric subjectivity present in her work. In organizing the timing of her dances in opposition to heteronormative ideas of a woman's progress and time in relation to family, heterosexuality, or reproduction, Erdman choreographed a mode of queer time. This queer temporality allowed for a centering of a single woman without holding gender as a stable binary. Even in her pieces with sexual undertones such as *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle* or *Hamadryad*, she utilized commonly sexualized movements and body parts in queer ways by focusing everything on a single woman's experience of herself and her life apart from anyone else. Critics picked up on these gendered resonances of Erdman's works and used them to either describe the dances in sexualized ways, to group them into nature dances, to complain that they were too abstruse, or to

stretch for connections to literary or mythical characters that the dances' titles referenced. In other words, critics did not allow an understanding of formalist abstraction premised on a female body. Formalist abstraction came to function as representative of American modern dance. However, as in the case of Erdman and Shearer, it barred women from entry due to claims their work was too pretentious, challenged heteronormative femininity too much, or was a nature dance.

***

Holding Back and Giving: The Evocations of Sybil Shearer's Abstract Dances

In June 1942, Sybil Shearer was rising to the top of New York modern dance. Her dance training in upstate New York, where her family lived after a brief time in Long Island when they left Toronto when Shearer was a toddler, led to a deepening of her love of dance when a student at Skidmore College and then at Bennington School of the Dance. At Bennington in 1934, she experienced The Big Four, fell "madly in love" with Hanya Holm and her technique, and then started on a career in the company of Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman as well as of Agnes de Mille.[516] In the late 1930s, Shearer began work on her own choreography with the financial support of her parents who built a studio for her on their property. All the while, she earned a reputation for flawless technique. In 1942, John Martin bestowed upon Shearer "The Season's Number 1 Debutante Award," a prestigious prize for emergent dancers/choreographers.[517] Surprisingly, she left this momentum in New York to move to Chicago the same year to accept

---

[516] Elizabeth McPherson, *The Bennington School of the Dance: A History in Writings and Interviews* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2013), 258.
[517] John Martin, "The Dance: Year's Awards: Season's Laurels to Antony Tudor and Sybil Shearer -- Week's Events," *New York Times*, June 14, 1942.

an invitation to teach dance for Central YMCA College and then Roosevelt College. She developed a curriculum for teaching students at the college as well as in an independent dance school she founded. Shortly after moving to Chicago, she met photographer Helen Balfour Morrison and embarked on a lifelong artistic and life collaboration.

Shearer's work after moving to Chicago could not be disentangled from her partnership with Helen Balfour Morrison and Helen's husband newspaper reporter Robert (Bob) Morrison.[518] Shearer related her relationship with Balfour Morrison to that between Martha Graham and her lover/artistic collaborator Louis Horst. As she recalled an incident from 1938-1939:

> Louis Horst had once said to [Katherine Litz] and me as we stood in costume for one of Agnes [de Mille's] ballets, "You two will never amount to anything—you have no Louis Horst!" I drew myself up and looked at him rather defiantly, smiled and said, "How do you know I have no Louis Horst?" Well, this was something that flashed to me from the future. I was positive I would be taken care of. And I was. I met my "Louis Horst" within a month of coming to the Windy City. After a lecture demonstration for the Dance Council of Chicago, I was introduced to Helen Balfour Morrison.[519]

As Shearer indicated in this excerpt from her autobiography, Balfour Morrison provided life, artistic, and financial support. Shearer came from a privileged family whose support enabled

---

[518] For clarity, I use "Balfour Morrison" when referring to Helen Balfour Morrison and "Morrison" when referring to Bob Morrison.

[519] Sybil Shearer, *Without Wings the Way Is Steep: The Autobiography of Sybil Shearer, Vol. 1*, First Edition (Northbrook, Ill.: Morison-Shearer Foundation, 2006), 305.

much of her early career (as well as an inheritance in 1950 that allowed her to build a studio/residence on the land of Balfour Morrison and Morrison in Northbrook, Illinois).

Support from Balfour Morrison and Morrison, both of whom had already achieved financial success in their respective industries, enabled Shearer to maintain a reclusive existence outside of New York. She could engage in her own, often abstruse, choreographic visions, present them in Chicago, other cities of the Midwest, and New York when she was ready. She did not need to worry about the financial precarity of a solo career without frequent performances at modern dance's primary venues. Shearer convinced Balfour Morrison to design lighting for her recitals shortly after they met. Balfour Morrison's expertise in photography lent a unique style to lighting for dance and became an important part of Shearer's works. Additionally, Balfour Morrison's photography of Shearer and later film of her impacted Shearer's perception of her dance and modes of performing. Balfour Morrison and Morrison used their Chicago connections and business savvy to aid in Shearer's success in Chicago. They recruited sponsors for her performances and made sure that the audience would include critics and patrons who were stakeholders in Chicago's arts.[520] With the immense support provided by Balfour Morrison, Shearer could experiment in ways that resonated queerly to New York's growing conventions for formalist abstraction and female bodies onstage.

An analysis of Shearer's work during the 1940s reveals the ways in which she intervened in the formalist abstraction that came to stand for the Americanness of American modern dance during that decade. She, similar to Jean Erdman, used movement exploration in ways that evoked

---

[520] Sybil Shearer, *The Autobiography of Sybil Shearer: Volume II: The Midwest Inheritance* (Morrison-Shearer Foundation, 2012), 133.

a sense of a woman existing in a singular, alone (but not lonely, as Shearer would adamantly clarify) way. In her use of the abstraction as Americanist frame, she centered women in a way that refused conventional notions of femininity. Whether through abandoning stage make-up and hairstyles or selecting costumes and hand movements that challenged modern dance displays of the virtuosic female body, Shearer presented and hid herself and her way of being in the world through her dance. These acts coalesced with her tendencies to dance for long periods without intermissions or change program orders without notice to contribute to her reputation as a modern dance rebel. Despite her geographic distance from New York and lack of concern for its concert dance conventions, she was in touch with modern dance trends through her annual New York performances until 1954 and through her relationships with Litz, de Mille, and Martin. She also received inspiration for her art from landscape architect Jens Jensen, a friend of her and Balfour Morrison who shared her love of nature. Critics' responses to Shearer's work varied greatly. They cohered in an attention to her technical mastery. Her abstract dances, though, garnered reviews that set them in opposition to theatricalism, categorized them as nature dances, or defined them as too ambiguous, opaque, and rebellious.

In this chapter section, I analyze three of Shearer's works from the 1940s that received significant critical attention and shed light on her trajectory into formalist abstraction during the course of the decade. I argue that, taken together, *In a Vacuum* (1941), *O Lost!* (1942), and *No Peace on Earth* (1945) demonstrate Shearer's interventions in formalist abstract modern dance by using movement to evoke issues of existing alone and hiding one's identity. Under the banner of movement for the sake of movement, these dances centered queer modes of performing gender in the early days of the Lavender Scare as the Cold War encroached. Similar to Erdman,

Shearer infused the formalist abstraction that came to stand for American modern dance with a distinctly women-centered, queer aesthetic stance.

Remains of Shearer's work during the 1940s span a multitude of forms. I draw from her unprocessed papers, non-Shearer archival collections that include material on her work, Balfour Morrison's films and photographs of Shearer dancing, and critical reception. Shearer's three-volume autobiography that she started in old age and then was published after her death allows for an understanding of her thought process during key moments of her career. I augment those materials with my embodied experience walking through her studio/residence, touching her costumes, exploring the home of Balfour Morrison and Morrison into which Shearer moved after Morrison's death, and speaking with members of the Morrison Shearer Foundation. These kinesthetic encounters provide crucial data on aspects of Shearer's art elided from those captured in writing, photography, or film. Taken together, this range of data equips a multi-sensorial interrogation of Shearer's work that is part and parcel of the kinesthetic approach to archival research required in dance studies.[521]

I join a limited conversation on Shearer. Due in part to her distance from New York and the limited access to her archive until recently, there is a lack of scholarship devoted to her specifically. She is briefly mentioned in books considering Bennington, Humphrey-Weidman, or the postwar avant-garde. For example, Elizabeth McPherson uses Shearer's letters and oral

[521] For examples of this kinesthetic approach to archival research, see Anurima Banerji, *Dancing Odissi: Paratopic Performances of Gender and State* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2019); Hannah Kosstrin, "Kinesthetic Seeing: A Model for Practice-in-Research," in *Futures of Dance Studies*, ed. Susan Manning, Janice Ross, and Rebecca Schneider (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), 135–53; Rebecca Rossen, *Dancing Jewish: Jewish Identity in American Modern and Postmodern Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).

histories of those who knew her in a way that evidences Bennington students' adulation for The Big Four.[522] Jill Johnston categorizes Shearer along with Litz as part of "The New American Modern Dance," though finding their abstract work more personal and intimate than those of their male counterparts.[523] Don McDonagh currently offers the most direct attention to Shearer. He, like Johnston, defines her abstraction as exploration of "personal gesture."[524] He also categorizes her in line with nature dance as an "earth mystic" and notes her unconventional lack of stage makeup or hairstyling.[525] In line with many of Shearer's contemporary critics, McDonagh draws a connection between her and Isadora Duncan due to Shearer's use of European classical music.[526] As McDonagh's writing was published in 1970, it lacks the revisionary approach to scholarship on abstract dance seen in current work on Cunningham. Recent dance scholarship has addressed the Shearer lacuna. Bonnie Brook's entry on Shearer for the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism* discusses Shearer's idiosyncratic performance practices in light of the fact that she did not develop a technique entirely of her own.[527] New book chapters by Lizzie Leopold and Pamela Krayenbuhl situate Shearer's dances on film, made in collaboration with Balfour Morrison, within Chicago dance history.[528] I extend existing Shearer scholarship by adopting a revisionary approach to understanding abstract dance and by

---

[522] McPherson, *The Bennington School of the Dance*, 37-38, 257-258.
[523] Johnston, "The New American Modern Dance," 180.
[524] Don McDonagh, *The Rise and Fall and Rise of Modern Dance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), 36-39.
[525] Ibid.
[526] Ibid.
[527] Bonnie Brooks, "Shearer, Sybil (1912–2005)," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2016).
[528] Lizzie Leopold, "Sybil Shearer: An Archive in Motion," in *Dancing on the Third Coast*, ed. Lizzie Leopold and Manning, Susan (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, forthcoming 2023); Pamela Krayenbuhl, "Celluloid Dances: How Chicago Women Documented Dance at Midcentury," in *Dancing on the Third Coast*, ed. Lizzie Leopold and Manning, Susan (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2023).

focusing on the ways in which her 1940s repertoire created resonances with its political and aesthetic milieu in ways that centered particular experiences of gender and sexuality.

I particularly analyze *In a Vacuum*, *O Lost!* and *No Peace on Earth* for three key reasons. First, they are representative of crucial moments in Shearer's 1940s repertoire: the height of her success in New York; her move to Chicago; and her turn to focus on Chicago over continual preparation for annual New York performances. Second, the solos demonstrate a chronological increase in uses of formalist abstraction. Although Shearer never clung to theatricalism as many of her contemporaries who defected from companies of The Big Four did, her work became more focused on movement apart from not only tactics of representation, but also conventions for presentation of the body. Taken with her simultaneous growing commitment to a life away from New York and the city's growing need for austerity in modern dance, these innovations reveal ways in which geographic distance from the US modern dance hub allowed for modes of expression that could be interpreted as subversive. Finally, these pieces stand out as landmarks in Shearer's programs on which critics would most often attempt to make meaning. Whereas critics deemed many of her other solos as nature dances or refused to interpret them, they ascribed a variety of meanings to *In a Vacuum*, *O Lost!* and *No Peace on Earth* that hinted in disparate ways to the contemporary political and artistic climate. These three solos allow for a tracing of Shearer's shifting interventions in the abstraction as Americanist frame. In particular, they illuminate her innovations in formalist abstraction that transformed modes of presenting the female body onstage.

***In a Vacuum* (1941)**

Figure 4 (left): Sybil Shearer in *In a Vacuum*. Photographer: screenshot from film by Helen Balfour Morrison. Chicago Film Archives.

Figure 5 (right): Shearer's *In a Vacuum* costume. Photographer: Author, taken at Shearer's studio in November 2019.

Shearer abstracts an image of a factory worker in her 1941 *In a Vacuum* in such a way that blurs lines between body and machine as well as forsakes an external world (Figure 4). From the first note of Modest Mussorgsky's stiff piano score, Shearer performs small, mechanical movements of her hands and feet in a confined way. A narrow orange and green striped dress as well as an amber spotlight that dictates her stage area further restrict her range of motion (Figure 5). She flexes her hands and meticulously gestures in such a way that she appears to be working a machine so intensely that she becomes part of it. Whether tapping a foot as though powering a pedal or hopping in her small circle of stage area, Shearer cannot move expansively. She stays within her spotlight, "making small stabs at the surrounding darkness by articulating her hands and feet with inhuman precision."[529] The stark horizontal and vertical stripes of her dress imprison her as her gaze fixes on her labor. *In a Vacuum* achieves a comedic effect through

[529] Constance Smith, "Dance Letter," *The Kenyon Review* VIII, no. 4 (Autumn 1946): 690.

stymied movement with hints of a neurotic obsession with one's labor as well as through Shearer's quick, fidget-like patterns of hand and foot gestures. Whenever a movement begins to extend beyond her circle of confinement, it quickly dissolves back into her rhythmic factory of miniscule motions. The two-and-a-half-minute solo ends with a dramatic piano chord, but no difference in choreography.[530] Shearer appears to be in a vacuum, unbothered by an external world and satisfied in the state of being alone that seems so bizarre to onlookers.

In a Vacuum could be reasonably interpreted as out-of-date for its 1941 debut. The solo resembled many of the choreographic concerns of leftist modern dancers in the 1930s who organized in union halls and fought for workers' rights. Its stymied steps even resembled New Dance Group leader Jane Dudley's *Harmonica Breakdown* (1938) protest against sharecropping. It also appeared to embody modernism's anxieties about the machine age, urban confinement, and the relationship between bodies and industrial labor. The solo departed from those two artistic streams in its particular attention to the state of being alone, in a vacuum apart from an outside environment. Additionally, Shearer distilled and abstracted those concerns in a manner that functioned in two key ways. First, the solo satirized labor issues in such a way that provided humor and commentary. Second, it abstracted concerns of labor and modernism to such a degree that placed focus on Shearer's singular body apart from an external society.

Shearer used satire in her early choreography and then moved to more abstract emphases on a single body during the 1940s. She was not a part of New Dance Group, but her satire as in *In a Vacuum* shared her contemporaries in the Group's desire for social commentary. Shearer

---

[530] Helen Balfour Morrison and Sybil Shearer, *In a Vacuum* (Northbrook, Ill., n.d.), https://www.chicagofilmarchives.org/collections/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/16110.

related her use of satire to an attempt to teach her audiences how to act. As she explained, "I suppose I was giving a sermon. I used to tell people how to behave; what I thought they should be doing. Finally I decided they weren't listening anyway—to anybody or anything."[531] This remark explained why she turned away from satire as well as a sense of a person in a bubble away from influencing forces, a facet of *In a Vacuum* and much of Shearer's repertoire during that decade. The titular phrase of *In a Vacuum* meant for Shearer more than a person working intensely without external rewards or insights as the solo suggested choreographically. It also entailed a mode of singular embodiment. She used the term in a 1942 letter to Margaret H'Doubler to describe a dance student who "thinks of herself as a person in a vacuum, so that when she tries to compose it is always an arm against a leg or an arm against an arm, in opposition or unison."[532] This student and Shearer in her solo that premiered the previous year were trapped in their own bodies in such a way that whether in confrontation or in harmony, their bodies were in conversation with only themselves. To exist in a vacuum required a mode of entrapment within one's body. Similar to Erdman's medium specificity in *Transformations of Medusa*, which brought about a push and pull of agency between different quadrants of the body, Shearer utilized abstraction in such a way that assigned body parts and movements their own forms of agency. The body was at once singular and multiple. Her fast-paced evocation of a factory recalled Freeman's concept of chrononormativity and its linear march towards maximum productivity. However, Shearer's internal focus in her own vacuum resisted the disciplining collective pull of that particular mode of heteronormative progress.

---

[531] Dawn Lille Horwitz, "Interview with Sybil Shearer," 1984, Sybil Shearer Papers, Newberry Library.
[532] Shearer, *Without Wings the Way Is Steep*, 304.

Critics interpreted *In a Vacuum* as comical in an abstract way that used the body as a source and site of humor. New York dance critics tended to focus on the piece as humorous without the aid of pantomime. In so doing, they implied a comparison to leftist works of the late 1930s that used pantomime to communicate a particular lived experience, such as in Dudley's gestures of a beaten sharecropper in *Harmonica Breakdown*. Critics also gestured to the formalist abstraction as a growing characteristic of Shearer's repertoire. When reviewing the solo's premiere, Walter Terry of the *New York Herald Tribune* identified its humor as coming from its movement apart from theatrical techniques of character representation. He wrote, "this dance of intense aimlessness with no theme nor characterization, was an example of pure kinetic slap-stick, and there is nothing funnier in this world than a giggling musculature."[533] In a later writing on the solo, he explained that the piece's "hysterical humor is neither mimed nor gestured but is, rather, purely muscular."[534] For Terry, the body itself was the solo's source of humor. This corporeal focus in tandem with the "aimlessness" of the piece also connoted a degree of medium specificity. Rather than view *In a Vacuum* as satire of a particular mode of labor, Terry interpreted it as a presentation of the humor of a frenzied movement quality reminiscent of a body shaking while giggling.

New York dance critics praised *In a Vacuum*'s corporeal, non-representational humor as of more artistic merit than pantomime. Lois Balcom explained in *Dance Observer* that the dance's comedy "is wholly legitimate, being inherent in the movement itself rather than in any extraneous pantomime or 'props.'"[535] She continued her focus on the moving body as the humor

---

[533] Terry Walter, "Sybil Shearer Seen in Debut as Solo Dancer: Young Artist's Program at Carnegie Chamber Hall Is One of Varied Moods," *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*, October 22, 1941.
[534] Walter Terry, "The Dance," *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*, May 4, 1946.
[535] Lois Balcom, "Sybil Shearer," *Dance Observer* 8, no. 9 (November 1941): 124.

in a later review, defining the dance as a "kinetic wisecrack."[536] Erdman shared Balcom's sense that the dance's humor came from its movement, rather than imitation. She described the piece in such a way that mirrored her own choreographic process of exploring movement and then allowing meanings or interpretations to develop from that initially abstract movement. Erdman explained that *In a Vacuum* used neither "direct imitation" nor "pantomime."[537] She argued that the piece, instead, revealed "the spiritual brew which is life today, telling us more acutely than could any word or naturalistic story how tragically hilarious is the human machine."[538] Both Balcom and Erdman put *In a Vacuum*'s abstract humor in opposition to theatrical techniques of pantomime, narrative representation, or text. By placing more value on Shearer's humor-from-movement than on comedy communicated through storytelling, they not only invoked the 1940s' messy shift from theatricalism to formalist abstraction, but also implied a break from the previous decade's pantomimic representations of labor.

Shearer's allusions to a frenzied factory worker at a machine, in combination with her lack of clear representation, were not as positively received by critics outside of New York. Whereas Terry, Balcom, and Erdman saw the piece as valuable for its reliance on movement apart from pantomime, critics from Chicago saw it as out-of-touch with the realities of the character Shearer seemed to evoke. For example, Felix Borowski of *The Chicago Sun* praised Shearer's virtuosity, but found *In a Vacuum* lacking in clarity. He remarked: "it was not always clear…what some of [Shearer's] choreography signified. The sketch which she called "In a Vacuum" might have represented a garment-worker using a sewing machine, a hypothesis which

---

[536] Lois Balcom, "Sybil Shearer and Katherine Litz," *Dance Observer* 11, no. 5 (February 1944): 21.
[537] Erdman, "The Dance as Non-Verbal Poetic Image, Part II," 64.
[538] Ibid.

probably will fill Miss Shearer with indignation."[539] Borowski's desire for clearly communicative choreography spoke to Chicago's preference for text-based theatricalism with accessible meanings. This taste was reflected in Second City dancers Ruth Page with her poem or narrative-based ballets and Katherine Dunham with her early dance theatre, as well as the impact of Graham's text-based dances on the city. Interestingly, Borowski did not think that Shearer failed in her lack of communication. Rather, he saw her as trying to do something else that was distinctly more elite to her than theatrical representation of a factory worker. Whereas New York dance critics saw Shearer's use of abstraction over theatricalism as evidence of artistic merit, Borowski implied a classed element to that choice. Although Shearer achieved acclaim in Chicago and the Midwest more broadly with her later (and more abstract) works, this early reception evidenced a friction between her aesthetic and the city's aesthetic imperatives.

In a Vacuum stood as Shearer's earliest major success. She used her movement, costume, and lighting to present a site of confinement. That small space was so acute that the vacuum in which she was stuck was reduced to her own body. She saw the dance as part of her collection of satires and as enacting social commentary. Her statement went beyond the previous artists' anxieties of modern living in the industrial age or the plights of workers. She distilled the isolation and labor of those concerns into an internal struggle of repetition in confinement. New York critics lauded the solo's medium specificity. They were able to come to this interpretation because of the piece's abstraction in comparison to the 1930s leftist dances about labor to which it alluded. Additionally, they were able to use *In a Vacuum* as an exemplary use of humor

---

[539] Felix Borowski, "Sybil Shearer's Program Shows Great Dance Talent," *The Chicago Sun*, April 10, 1943, Sybil Shearer Papers, Newberry Library.

without the theatrical aids of pantomime or text and, thereby, push modern dance towards formalist abstraction. Chicago's initial reaction to the solo was indicative of the city's aesthetic imperatives, but not of the success Shearer would achieve there in later years. However, Borowski's praise of her technique foreshadowed later emphases of Midwest critics on her virtuosity as the site of her merit, rather than choreographic choices in relation to (lack of) narrative or representation. *In a Vacuum* stood both in line with its contemporary social and artistic concerns as well as in refusal of them due to its internal focus. This combination of external conditions and internal complexities as mediated through choreographic tactics of abstraction would continue throughout Shearer's 1940s repertoire.

***O Lost!* (1942)**

Figure 6 (left): Shearer in beginning section of *O Lost!* Photographer: screenshot from film by Balfour Morrison. Chicago Film Archives.
Figure 7 (right): Shearer in middle section of *O Lost!* Photographer: screenshot from film by Balfour Morrison. Chicago Film Archives.

O Lost! continues *In a Vacuum*'s choreography for intricate hand movement. The 1942 solo follows an A-B-A structure with repetition of gentle, swaying steps separated by a ferocious and frustrated middle section in which Shearer appears to be in a fight against space to take control of her body. She begins the four-minute solo with small steps forward and to the side that

match the soft piano melody by Frédéric Chopin to which she dances. In a long dark dress, she shifts her weight from foot-to-foot forwards, backwards, and then with a step to the side. She turns in a parallel pirouette and ruptures her easy steps by striking a pose of determination or indignation. She stands firmly on both feet with her shoulders down, chin up, and a facial expression of intense frustration or anger (Figure 6). Shearer repeats her easy swaying steps and their containment of emotion. This time, though, she poses on one foot with her other extended on the floor to the side. She matches this unsteady triangular shape by bringing one arm from over her head to by her side with a series of hand articulations moving downwards. This hand choreography appears to pick up the air, squeeze it, and then release it with fingers in a gnarled shape as though deformed from the process of engaging with the space.

O Lost!'s small moments of defiance in the opening section's gentle sway explode into a thrashing middle section in which Shearer combats invisible forces that pull her limbs apart from her body or cause her to attempt to release her body from unseen constraints. A crescendo in dynamics of the Chopin score accompanies Shearer's rapid increase in intensity. The piano chords crash as she collapses her torso towards her ankles with her arms writhing upwards as though trying to break out of shackles (Figure 7). She spins with her head down in meandering directions dictated by the immense pressure of her movement quality, a great contrast from her previous small pirouette that merely ended with a facial expression and pose of frustration. In this middle section, abstract movement evokes an intense frustration, anger, and struggle for control of one's body. It does not progress in those evocations, though, as it soon returns to a

reprise of Shearer's gentle opening choreography accompanied by soft piano.[540] *O Lost!*, though purportedly without a discrete meaning, contains undeniable imagery of one confronting her struggle with frustration and control over her body in opposition to external forces.

O Lost!'s title put the work in conversation with Shearer's colleagues' pieces concerning loss and loneliness during World War II and immediately after, such as those of Pearl Primus, Eve Gentry, and Erdman. However, Shearer diverged from those other pieces in her abstract, yet obvious, portrayal of frustration and indignation. Primus's *Motherless Child* (1944), *To One Dead* (1946), and *Chamber of Tears* (1946) pushed for anti-racism and anti-fascism within contemplations of loss and loneliness. Gentry's *Goodbye, My Johnny* (ca. 1941), *Four Walls Blues* (1941), and *Bittersweet Blues* (ca. 1941) showed a woman laboring and persevering through dance as she waited for her lover. Erdman's *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle* (1945) focused on a world of women as complete and allowing a woman to be understood only in relation to herself. Shearer's *O Lost!*, like Erdman's *Daughters*, did not foster ideas of her in relation to another person. Instead, and unlike Primus's, Gentry's, and Erdman's loss/loneliness dances, it promoted ideas of her in a battle against the external world and forces that world exerts upon her body. Shearer's first section of *O Lost!* combined acutely contained movement with moments of revelation of a frustration channeled through intense hand choreography. Her middle section explored those brief moments in which an anger could not be contained. She fought to break her body free from the forces that, for example, pulled her leg and arm apart in opposite directions, shackled her hands behind her back, or pushed her downwards into a spin away from

---

[540] Helen Balfour Morrison and Sybil Shearer, *O Lost* (Northbrook, Ill., n.d.), https://www.chicagofilmarchives.org/collections/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/16668.

centerstage. The solo's final section, a nearly exact repetition of the first one, channeled all of the middle section's struggles back into tightly contained and somber movement. The sense of loneliness or loss suggested by the piece's title surfaced in a sense of loss of oneself at the hands of external controls. Similar to Erdman, Shearer did not use narrative or representation, but capitalized on readily available interpretations of particular movement qualities. In so doing, she blurred lines between meaning and unbound movement in abstract dance created with an image in mind.

Shearer defined *O Lost!* as "the inner and outer aspects of a woman's feelings, the contrast of her front to the world and her inner torture."[541] She described her choreographic process in a similar way to that of Erdman: "my dances were made from messages that were coming to me from all sides, thoughts that came from different worlds that I was giving back through movement."[542] In other words, she started with an image or idea in mind and then created dance from that idea, but not a direct representation of it. In the case of *O Lost!* this included aspects of Shearer's concept of herself. She remarked on the piece, "I knew this character. It was not myself. I put myself into her."[543] For *O Lost!* Shearer started with an image of a woman confined in her presentation of herself to the outside world while battling torture within herself. She then infused aspects of her own experience into that idea while embodying it through abstract movement exploration. Taking Shearer's inspiration and artistic process for *O Lost!* in tandem with her life circumstances at that time, the exigency of her move to Chicago and burgeoning relationship with Balfour Morrison are illuminated.

[541] Shearer, *The Midwest Inheritance*, 153.
[542] Ibid.
[543] Ibid.

O Lost! coincided with Shearer's move to Chicago and the freedom that represented from the conventions of New York modern dance. She premiered the piece in December 1942 at Skidmore's Little Theatre in upstate New York, months after her move to the Midwest.[544] She referred to her move as "starting a new life."[545] She explained this rebirth, writing, "there is a great sense of freedom—I felt myself as a force, not just an echo—but there is also a residue of opinions and methods which have somehow to be absorbed in a way that does not clutter up new insights."[546] Shearer also characterized this move as a necessity because she could not continue to live in "the artificiality of the city."[547] In Chicago's (at the time rural) suburb of Northbrook, she could be "a force" by existing apart from New York's modern dance hierarchies as well as by creating a new life with Balfour Morrison in whom she had a collaborator and sponsor who allowed her to take artistic risks. Conventions for creating dance and living, which she felt to be artificial, could be put aside in favor of a new creative practice in, what Halbetstam might refer to as, a queer space unhindered by heteronormative orientations towards progress through life. Shearer felt a pull of the balance between her previous ways of dancing and living and the new, more open ways she developed in Chicago when she would return to New York for concerts that elicited varying degrees of critical success. Her ability to live queerly with Balfour Morrison and Morrison was part of her new freedom in Chicago, especially in the immediate postwar years as the Lavender Scare shook modern dance in New York. Although modern dance had long been a home for queer artists, the Lavender Scare and Red Scare necessitated an obfuscation of those

---

[544] Morrison and Shearer, *O Lost*.
[545] Shearer, *The Midwest Inheritance*, 1.
[546] Ibid.
[547] Sybil Shearer, An Interview with Sybil Shearer, interview by Carol Doty, May 19, 1976, Sybil Shearer Papers, Newberry Library.

ways of being. In Chicago, and outside of the hub of modern dance to be surveilled by the state, Shearer's relationship with Balfour Morrison could exist in ways that might have been impeded in New York.

Changes in dance technique and modes of presenting the body were part of Shearer's new ways of dancing and being in Chicago. With the help of Balfour Morrison in 1943, Shearer published *Sybil Shearer: Creative Dance*, a short book partly intended for publicity comprised of her thoughts on dance technique as well as current reviews of her work. The book contained Shearer's thoughts on motion, stillness, space, and other formal elements of dance creation. Crucially, she began and ended her meditations with an emphasis on the body as a conduit for knowledge and the knowing body as dance's unique attribute, or the essential medium for an approach grounded in medium specificity. In the beginning of the text, she asserted: "to know about a thing is not enough. In order to get a realization of a thing you must know it. Therefore you must take it into yourself."[548] In this stance, knowledge must be embodied in order to be understood. More importantly in the case of Shearer's artistic practice, ideas with which she began her movement exploration went through a process of embodiment in which she infused herself into those ideas. Shearer's argument for embodied knowledge clarified her assertion that she put herself into her *O Lost!* character. With this particular creative process, even Shearer's most abstract solos contained aspects of her and her lived experiences as she insisted on a union between her initial idea and her body. At the conclusion of her remarks in the book, Shearer proposed that "through the dance one can become more aware of oneself, of life, and of life's

---

[548] Sybil Shearer, *Sybil Shearer: Creative Dancer*, 1943 [emphasis in original], Sybil Shearer Papers, Newberry Library.

forces."[549] Dance, for Shearer, functioned as a way of knowing oneself in relation to an external world. The centrality of this belief in her choreographic practice resulted in a fusion of aspects of herself and how she felt to exist in relation to outside forces into her works of formalist abstraction. Although Shearer's act of starting her creation with an idea and then channeling that idea through her body could seem to lead to a dance that resembled some kind of representation, it did not function in that way for her. She saw embodied knowledge as dance's unique attribute and, therefore, the key characteristic of a formalist work grounded in medium specificity.

Shearer's focus on internal, embodied knowledge and freedom from convention that she developed in Chicago carried through to a break from concert dance norms for presenting the female body. She abandoned stage make-up and carefully styled hair, a choice numerous critics commented upon. Dance writer Katherine Wolfe described Shearer's styling in greatest detail:

> [Shearer's] personal appearance, both off and on-stage, is characterized by an almost masochistic disregard of the elementary details of grooming. Mrs. Morrison explains her aversion to foot-lights by the fact that "God does not use footlights…and she never likes to interfere with God."[550] Perhaps the fact that God does not endow human beings with brightly carmined lips explains Shearer's aversion to off-stage make-up which has recently carried over to her concert appearances. Bobby-pins may be another unauthorized interference with nature, at any rate the Shearer hair styling—or lack of styling—has become almost trademark and has provoked considerable criticism from

---

[549] Ibid.
[550] Margaret Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance.* (Brooklyn: Knopf, 1949), 242.

> those who object to the casual, and frequently frowsy, disarray which sometimes makes her crowning glory look as though [it has not been touched].[551]

Wolfe's lengthy critique of Shearer's hair and make-up revealed the magnitude of her break from US modern dance conventions. Shearer's technique drew from that of Holm, Humphrey, and Weidman. Her choreography was part of a movement in the 1940s towards formalist abstraction and shared some characteristics with Litz, her close friend, Humphrey-Weidman and de Mille colleague, as well as Erdman. However, her refusal of conventional, heteronormative beauty practices was a key part of what led many critics to label her as a rebel, recluse, or, as Wolfe put it, "one of the most unique figures in the contemporary dance world."[552] Balfour Morrison's patronage of Shearer, along with her own familial economic privilege, enabled her disregard for beauty norms. She did not need to appease critics or audiences in the same way that an artist who needed to sell tickets in order to survive did. In Chicago and in partnership with Balfour Morrison, Shearer's freedom was geographic, creative, embodied, and material. She, like Erdman, had a ready and willing partner/collaborator who could provide financial backing and creative feedback for an exploration of the power of medium specificity in modern dance.

Critical reception of *O Lost!* varied greatly. Many critics did not attempt to interpret the piece and, instead, grouped it with what they categorized as Shearer's "nature dances," such as her abstract solos *In the Cool of the Garden* or *In the Field*.[553] When critics attempted an interpretation, they either focused on the piece as an example of distortion or as an analysis of a

---

[551] Katherine Wolfe, "Sybil Shearer," 1955, Sybil Shearer Papers, Newberry Library.
[552] Ibid.
[553] For an example of this grouping of *O Lost!* as a nature dance without explanation or interpretation, see Margaret Lloyd, "News of Music--Sybil Shearer Makes Debut in Boston: Dancer Presents Solo Program at New England Mutual Hall," *The Christian Science Monitor (1908-)*, February 19, 1948.

woman's, or Shearer's, internal state. Balcom and a writer for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* saw the piece as a choreographic study in distortion. In a review for *Dance Observer*, Balcom did not attempt to assign meaning to the solo. Instead, she described *O Lost!*'s "uncanny effect" due to its "strange admixture of distorted movement, romantic music, crystal necklace, and hypnotic patterns which once seemed to be so inappropriate turns out to be entirely right and inevitable."[554] She focused on the piece's seemingly incompatible romantic music with formalist, movement. The meaning, for Balcom, was located in the piece's movement itself as she saw it divorced from music and costume. A writer for *Cleveland Plain Dealer* remarked that in the solo "the conventional gestures suddenly distorted, the sudden departures from dead calm into fast jagged movement gave clearly the character of those who must put up a front to hide their inward turmoil."[555] This writer understood *O Lost!*'s distortion of movement and dynamic as evocative of someone unable to show their inner trouble or their inner being. This interpretation, written in 1947, took on particular resonances at the beginning of the Lavender Scare. The Cleveland writer's review hinted at a fragmentation of oneself that resonated with Martin's take on the piece as capturing Shearer's inner self. Martin recommended in 1943 that the dance's title "may give some hint of the quality of the Shearer mind."[556] He shared a close relationship with Shearer and determined the state of being lost among internal and external forces to be characteristic of her.[557] A survey of Shearer's and Martin's correspondence with one another

---

[554] Balcom, "Sybil Shearer and Katherine Litz," 21.
[555] "Sybil Shearer, Civic Theatre, Chicago, April 2," *Dance News*, May 1948, Sybil Shearer Papers, Newberry Library.
[556] John Martin, "Dance," *Mademoiselle*, November 1943, Sybil Shearer Papers, Newberry Library.
[557] Sybil Shearer and John Martin, "Sybil Shearer Correspondence with John Martin," n.d., Sybil Shearer Papers, Newberry Library. A large collection of Shearer's and Martin's correspondence in Shearer's papers suggests the two shared a very close relationship, perhaps an early romantic relationship, and strain on their friendship at times due to Martin's wife, Hettie Louise Martin, or Balfour Morrison.

suggests that he (and perhaps others of her close colleagues) knew of her queer identity, though in strategically discrete ways. Martin's direction towards internal emotions was followed by most critics who ventured an explanation for the piece.

Critics who focused on *O Lost!* as a portrayal of complex emotions focused on its clarity even without a narrative or thread uniting it to other pieces in Shearer's recital. For example, Terry wrote that it "conveyed an emotional theme immediately understandable and developed it clearly and directly."[558] However, he contradicted himself later in the review by saying that the solo "compelled one to discard 'what' and 'why' and other queries and simply respond muscularly with the dance to the wonders…of the movements she was experiencing on stage."[559] For Terry, in other words, something was clearly communicated in *O Lost!* but meanings were not as pressing as the kinesthetic display of Shearer's dance. That sense of a purposeful clarity without a reference to what Shearer was clear about echoed in Hilda Koenigsberg's review for the 92nd Street Young Men's-Young Women's Hebrew Association's (92Y) member bulletin. She described the solo as 'performed with dignity and restraint."[560] Ray Brown of the *Washington Post* also saw the dance as articulating a relationship between an internal state and an external world, but without the clarity found by Terry and Koenigsberg. He defined the piece as "the perplexity of indivisuality [sic] in the cosmic maze."[561] All of the critics who offered interpretations of *O Lost!* cohered in their allusions to Shearer's restraint from showing something, but did not elaborate on exactly what that something was. Her use of juxtaposition

---

558 Walter Terry, "The Ballet: Exciting Revival," *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*, November 28, 1949.
559 Ibid.
560 Hilda Koenigsberg, "Three Dancers," *The "Y" Bulletin*, December 11, 1942.
561 Ray C. B. Brown, "Series of Dance Recitals Climaxed by Sybil Shearer," *The Washington Post (1923-1954)*, April 30, 1946.

and distortion in the solo enabled critics to emphasize its movement as of foremost importance, even when interpreted as conveying something about her own experiences.

As one of her first pieces completed after her move to Chicago, *O Lost!* exhibited key tenets of Shearer's new feeling of freedom away from New York. Her turn to embodied knowledge as a key source and site in her creative process as well as her refusal of stage make-up and hairstyles enabled her to circumvent some of what she saw as artificial in New York. It also enabled her to put some of herself into her character for *O Lost!* while still framing it as an abstract dance created with an image in mind. Her use of drastic juxtaposition of movement and dynamics enabled the piece's critics to focus on it as abstract or delve into its emotional evocations. Both in its choreography and in its reception, *O Lost!* hid and revealed. Its poses of defiance and restraint in the first and final sections conveyed that Shearer was stopping just short of doing something. Her middle section filled with furious movement and imagery of being in shackles, too, posed a question of what would happen if she was not in this external system of restraint. Some critics seemed to know what was hidden, or thought they did, and others suggested something was covered but brought their attention more to the movement in and of itself. This relationship between what was hidden and what was revealed in Shearer's work increased in visibility and urgency in her 1945 *No Peace on Earth*.

***No Peace on Earth* (1945)**

Figure 8 (left): Shearer in *No Peace on Earth*. Photographer: screenshot from film by Balfour Morrison. Chicago Film Archives.

Figure 9 (right): Shearer in *No Peace on Earth*. Photographer: screenshot from film by Balfour Morrison. Chicago Film Archives.

Shearer shrouds herself in a floor-length dark dress and hooded veil in *No Peace on Earth* (Figure 8).[562] Only her face and hands are visible. She executes most of the one-and-a-half-minute solo facing upstage so all of her skin is hidden and she appears as a moving shadow. A piano score with minor chords by Alexander Scriabin provides an ominous counterpoint to Shearer's hidden body. She faces front and begins the piece with, what had become by 1945, her signature hand choreography. Standing still, she beats the back of a hand onto her opposite arm. Her fingers open and close as she brings her hands into a prayer position above her face. Although she faces the audience for this opening phrase, her head tilts down so that the top of her hood covers any portion of her face that might have been visible. Shearer turns to face the back, seated in a straddle with her feet pointing and flexing as her fingers grind together in their prayer position (Figure 9). She extends her chest open into a high release as she opens her legs wider to the side. Her whole body extends open in a break from the piece's closed aesthetic.

[562] Helen Balfour Morrison and Sybil Shearer, *No Peace on Earth* (Northbrook, Ill., n.d.), https://www.chicagofilmarchives.org/collections/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/16672.

However, she still faces the back, hiding more than revealing. When Shearer makes her way to stand, she refuses to face her audience. She angles herself to a downstage corner with her torso hung at a ninety-degree angle from the floor. Her clasped hands push her upwards into a series of jumps until she collapses back into a kneeling position with her hands, again, fighting to grasp together in a prayer position. The short solo finishes before it seems to fully begin. It raises questions. Why are the only open body positions, ones that seemed more peaceful than the rest of the solo's gnashing hands, done when Shearer is seated and facing the back? Why does she not face the audience? What is hidden and what is revealed? In *No Peace on Earth*, the titular lack of harmony requires a shrouding of Shearer's body and, in line with her choreographic process, embodied knowledge.

Shearer's act of concealing her body and identity took on queer resonances in *No Peace on Earth* just before the onset of the Cold War and its intensification of the Lavender Scare. When considered in tandem with her comments about loneliness, her way of always hiding more than she revealed of herself, and her partnership with Balfour Morrison, the abstract solo generated meanings that surpassed issues of war and peace at the end of World War II. Shearer wrote on the relationship between a performer and her audience. In that essay, she indicated how she particularly needed to (not) show herself to her spectators.[563] She explained:

> During my life I feel I have held back more than I have given, but when I have given I have done it completely. A performance for me was a complete emptying out, so that after each one I had to have time to recuperate. I needed to withdraw between

---

[563] Sybil Shearer, "Audience," n.d., Sybil Shearer Papers, Newberry Library. Although this essay is undated, it seems to be from a later portion of her career based on context gleaned from extensive research in Shearer's papers.

> performances in order that I would have the full amount to give the next time. Since my medium was basically physical, taking the complete of my body, and since giving a performance was also a spiritual act, taking the full use of my unseen powers, I was actually afraid, and probably for my immediate state of development in this life rightly so, afraid of giving myself completely to one other person. Right or wrong this was my life, and, according to the written word of individuals and professionals alike, many people experienced the power that this way of life gave me.[564]

In this passage, Shearer interwove practical performance considerations with description of a need to restrain herself from revealing her self to her audience. It is important to understand Shearer's writing in that essay alongside her choreographic process. As she stated in the essay, she poured her entire body, which she saw as a repository of knowledge and experience, into her solos. Even her most abstract choreography, in this way, contained her entire self. Shearer considered herself "rightly…afraid" of revealing the "complete of [her] body to her audience due to her "immediate state of development in this life."[565] In other words, she found her mode of existing—embodied fully in her dance—as potentially deleterious to reveal. Her queer relationship with Balfour Morrison, living arrangement with Balfour Morrison and Morrison, and refusal of heteronormative beauty standards for women on the concert dance stage all would have raised red, or lavender, flags as the 1940s progressed and modern dance became a target of state surveillance. As Shearer asserted, though, her way of life gave her power that she transferred to some of her spectators. This power, her embodied knowledge based on particular

---

[564] Ibid.
[565] Ibid.

lived experiences poured into her dance, required her to carefully balance hiding and revealing herself. In *No Peace on Earth*, as Shearer remarked about her career, she held back more than she gave visually. Despite this, much could be gleaned by the spectators she mentioned, who could sense what was visually hidden.

Not all spectators knew what Shearer was hiding and showing. She and Balfour Morrison were unafraid of taking critics to task when the women felt that reviews wrongly framed Shearer's work.[566] Shearer sent de Mille corrections to the latter's writing about her. This feedback evidenced her frustration at those who mistook her negotiation of hiding/revealing herself as a reclusive loneliness, a stance shared among many critics. Shearer took issue with de Mille's characterization of her as one who listens to her inner voice at the expense of not listening to her audience. She replied: "Agnes, if you knew at first hand about the 'inner voice,' you could never say that listening to it could deafen one to the audience. The more one listens, the more one knows, not just about oneself, but about all living things, especially people and their problems."[567] She saw de Mille as lacking an understanding of what it meant to have an "inner voice" that could lead one to a keener knowledge of people who face problems. She thought of herself as able to use her own embodied experience to speak to a particular audience who faced negotiations with their inner voices similar to her own confrontations.

---

[566] For examples of Shearer and Balfour Morrison's willingness to confront critics or stakeholders in concert dance, see Sybil Shearer, "Letter to Agnes DeMille," 1967, Sybil Shearer Papers, Newberry Library; Sybil Shearer, "Sorting Out Lincoln Kirstein and the Twentieth Century," *Ballett International*, January 1988, Sybil Shearer Papers, Newberry Library; Sybil Shearer, "Letter to Lincoln Kirstein," 1987, Sybil Shearer Papers, Newberry Library; Sybil Shearer, "Doris Humphrey," n.d., Sybil Shearer Papers, Newberry Library; Shearer, *The Midwest Inheritance*. *The Midwest Inheritance* contains many letters by Shearer and Balfour Morrison in which they take critics to task. In that volume and in "Doris Humphrey," Shearer shares her distaste for José Limón, a fellow alumnus of Humphrey-Weidman who went on to great success.
[567] Shearer, "Letter to Agnes DeMille."

When responding to de Mille, Shearer also alluded to Balfour Morrison when defending her financial affairs and lifestyle. She refuted de Mille's characterization of her financial status as "subsidy."[568] She argued, "no, it simply means a different way of life, not the Broadway or Hollywood way."[569] In addition to taking a jab at de Mille's commercial success, Shearer framed her "subsidy"—Balfour Morrison—as a "way of life," indicating the importance of that support beyond finances.[570] Shearer combatted de Mille's assertion that she was lonely by stating, "Agnes, I am not alone. I have a wonderful dance family just as you have."[571] Shearer framed kinship as premised on artistic creation, not heteronormative definitions of family. Her framing of a dance family spoke not only to her dance colleagues, students, and collaborators, but also in a particular way to how she saw her initial union with Balfour Morrison. She described the event in her autobiography:

> This spiritual recognition of another artist through the mystery of his work and the mystery of creation of that work is a powerful contract. This was especially true for Helen Morrison and myself, since each of us seemed to be using the same creative core—movement, the symbol for and the actuality of life. Once this awareness surfaces in the individual, its attraction supersedes all other attractions.[572]

In this description of her relationship with Balfour Morrison, Shearer indicated that they shared an attraction that was generative in ways premised on creation of life vis-à-vis movement, but

---

[568] Ibid.
[569] Ibid.
[570] For Shearer's distaste of Broadway and the rift that caused between her and DeMille, see Shearer, *The Midwest Inheritance*, 24, 68.
[571] Shearer, "Letter to Agnes DeMille."
[572] Shearer, *The Midwest Inheritance*, 5.

not in heteronormative modes. Shearer's work contained queer resonances for those who saw them. As she indicated to de Mille, she was able to communicate in a particular way to audience members who faced challenges that resonated with the resistance to heteronormative conventions manifested in the internal/external push/pull in so much of her repertoire during the 1940s. Her ability to do so was aided by her "way of life" with Balfour Morrison financially and personally. Shearer hid and revealed both herself and the meanings that surfaced in her abstract work. These corrections for de Mille shed light on *No Peace on Earth* and queer meanings it held back from some audiences and gave to those who would receive them.

Some critics opted for a universalizing take on *No Peace on Earth* and interpreted it in line with its immediate postwar context. These writers defined the piece as an abstract exploration of the loss and devastation requisite of war. For example, Margaret Lloyd saw it as "refer[ring] to the hounded and homeless outcasts of war."[573] A *Cleveland Plain Dealer* critic similarly saw it as "the personification of the inward, frantic sorrow of every bereft woman," suggesting widows of war.[574] In these understandings of the solo, Shearer's inward and hidden movement could be seen in a universal way that applied to victims of war regardless of place or positionality. This mode of interpretation also fit with US modern dance's move towards claims of universality in the postwar era. However, these reviews of *No Peace on Earth* stood apart from the majority of critics' responses to the dance. Most writers saw it as expressing an intense, personal pain. A *Dance Observer* critic bridged universal and deeply personal understandings of the solo, writing "this expression of universal suffering is an exciting manifestation of the artist's

---

[573] Lloyd, "News of Music--Sybil Shearer Makes Debut in Boston."
[574] "Dances at Museum by Sybil Shearer Are Rare, Creative."

ability to overcome the familiar pitfalls of the soul-searching dance."[575] This review posited *No Peace on Earth* as part of a "soul-searching" genre that could move beyond that category to universal applicability through its use of abstract movement. Most critics, though, focused on the piece as showing a personal, emotional pain.

When focusing on *No Peace on Earth*'s pain, critics noted its hidden qualities or hand choreography. For example, R. Pomeroy explained that the piece was done in a hooded costume and slightly off-center stage.[576] After marking these ways in which Shearer was obfuscated, he remarked that the solo was "extremely painful."[577] Wolfe found the piece "starkly and terribly tragic in its agonized clasping and unclasping of hands."[578] A critic for the *Milwaukee Sentinel* shared Wolfe's focus on hands, defining it as "a nightmare scene of flickering and shackled hands and writhing body."[579] When taken together, these writers' emphases on obfuscation and hand restriction suggested that perhaps Shearer's hands were part of her act of hiding and revealing herself. She possessed the power to hold back or give, as she might have phrased it. The negotiation between those two decisions contributed to the overall pained imagery of *No Peace on Earth*. Perhaps Shearer felt afraid to fully reveal herself, but the power to do so lay in her hands.

No Peace on Earth did not provide any resolutions, representations, or answers. Instead, Shearer focused on the difficult process of being in a tumultuous moment and deciding how

---

[575] Mildred Ackerman, "Sybil Shearer," *Dance Observer* 15, no. 7 (September 1948): 89–90.
[576] R Pomeroy, "Sybil Shearer: A Participation," n.d., Sybil Shearer Papers, Newberry Library.
[577] Ibid.
[578] Wolfe, "Sybil Shearer."
[579] D.M., "Dancer Enthralls Audience," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 28, 1948, Sybil Shearer Papers, Newberry Library.

much of oneself to shroud or display. Similar to Erdman's women-centric dances, the solo resisted evocations of the progress and collectivity of chrononormativity and, instead, operated in queer time. With her whole body concealed for most of the dance, Shearer hid her lack of hair styling and make-up that critics so often used to set her apart from her contemporaries. However, when she sat on the floor, below the audience's gaze line, and faced upstage, she opened her body in a released position with her chest pointing upwards and her straddled legs spreading open. She found a place in which she could move outside of the concealment required when facing the public world for the rest of the dance. Shearer focused on an internal struggle that could not be completely divorced from her wider modern dance and national contexts. As queer theorist Annamarie Jagose has written, "the tendency to figure 'lesbian' as utopic and outside dominant conceptual frameworks essentializes that category as transgressive or subversive."[580] Shearer did not attempt to subvert dominant society or modern dance aesthetic conventions so much as to exist in those realms in a way that did not negate the freedom she found with Balfour Morrison in Chicago. In *No Peace on Earth*, Shearer's abstraction allowed easy connotations of specific movements for the audience. For example, clasping/unclasping hands in a prayer position conveyed shackles or pain to some critics. In this way, she used formalist abstraction in ways that allowed ideas with which she began her choreographic process. Similar to much of Erdman's work in the 1940s, Shearer demonstrated in *No Peace on Earth* the ways in which formalist abstraction was never free from identity markers such as gender and sexuality.

Shearer utilized a choreographic process of abstract movement exploration in such a way that allowed meanings to surface without theatrical tactics of representation, narrative, or text.

---

[580] Annamarie Jagose, *Lesbian Utopics* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 5.

She started her choreography with an image or idea in mind, infused that with her own embodied knowledge, and then generated dance that both spoke to her own lived experiences and moved beyond an individual focus as they connected with some audience members. For *In a Vacuum*, *O Lost!* and *No Peace on Earth*, she evoked a confrontation between one's internal being and constraints put upon one's body by the external world. As the 1940s progressed towards the Cold War and Lavender Scare, these pieces took on queer meanings, especially when considered in tandem with Shearer's writings on them and her work in general. At the same time as she moved to greater abstraction, she also turned away from heteronormative beauty conventions of the concert stage. Her refusal of styled hair and make-up worked with her emphasis on hand choreography to innovate a mode of presenting the female body onstage in ways that circumvented heteronormative sexualization. Aided by Balfour Morrison's financial, creative, and emotional support, Shearer took risks in the freedom of Chicago, away from surveillance requisite of New York as US modern dance's hub. Her collaboration with Balfour Morrison also enabled Shearer to refuse theatricalism and many of its practitioners' moves into Broadway.

Dancing an Opaque Transparency

Figures 10 and 11: Shearer's studio in Northbrook, Illinois. Photographer: Author, taken at Shearer's studio in November 2019.

Shearer's solos in the 1940s reflected inwards and allowed a transparency for those who knew where to look. In many ways, this aesthetic was represented in the studio she built for herself on a plot of land she purchased on Balfour Morrison and Morrison's property in 1950. The studio contained no mirrors, but it had a wall of windows. During frigid Chicago winters, such as when I visited the studio, the windows would fog from the heat produced inside. It created the effect of seeing one's reflection in a slightly distorted way (Figures 10 and 11). Those on the outside of the studio could determine the person they were seeing, but only if they knew for whom they were looking. Shearer's *In a Vacuum*, *O Lost!* and *No Peace on Earth* contained elements of herself, perhaps slightly distorted, for those who knew the parts of her self that were not open to public view.

***

Finding and Troubling Identity Markers in the Abstraction as Americanist Frame

The 1940s witnessed an incomplete transition from theatricalism to formalist abstraction. Erdman and Shearer took part in that move away from clear meanings. Both women, though,

allowed interpretations of their work and infused their own ideas or images into their dances. Erdman and Shearer used similar processes to one another. They started with an image or idea and then used abstract movement exploration to create a dance that went beyond their initial ideas. They held movement as the most important part of dance, aligning with critics and artists who championed medium specificity. Their works demonstrated that movement, however, could never be free from meaning. Critics sometimes complained Erdman's and Shearer's works were too abstruse and refused to interpret them. In other instances, they accepted the works as abstract and, in so doing, freed themselves from expectations of interpretation. At other times, critics found gendered meanings in the women's dances.

As formalist abstraction came to stand as Americanism in American modern dance, Shearer and Erdman centered women. US modern dance's turn to formalist abstraction was accompanied by a rapid increase in critical attention to male choreographers while many women moved to Broadway. Erdman and Shearer did not gain as much praise or attention as their male counterparts in abstract dance. Still, they challenged dominant conceptions of the abstract body as a white male. Through their writings and dances, they argued for the place of women in formalist abstraction, not relegated to theatricalism or Broadway. In some of their dances, their women took on queer modes of being. For Erdman, her women could be viewed only in relation to themselves even when dancing in what would conventionally be considered as sexualized ways. Shearer's works, in deep collaboration with Balfour Morrison, contained queer resonances that were particularly exigent as the Lavender Scare gained momentum. Both Erdman and Shearer pointed to the ways in which meanings could be found in purportedly meaning-less or opaque works for those who desired, or needed, to find them.

***

Epilogue

By the end of the 1940s, both Erdman and Shearer turned their attention to ensemble pieces for their new respective dance companies. Surprisingly due to her earlier writings against theatre in dance, Erdman took on theatre in serious ways at the end of the decade and then into her later career. She choreographed for plays at the end of the 1940s and continued to develop her own kind of total-theatre. She was nominated for and won numerous awards for her theatre productions and choreography. In 1972, she founded Theatre of the Open Eye with Campbell. Erdman created total-theatre works for her company, drawing from the many dance forms in which she had experience along with music, acting, Noh, myth, and other dramatic techniques she honed over her career. Although Erdman's move to dance theatre fused with so many different performance modes drastically contrasted her absolute dance practice in the 1940s, it was in many ways a continuation of her earliest years training in disparate dance and theatre techniques in Hawaii. Rather than consider her move to total-theatre as an abandonment of her previous aesthetic philosophy, it might be viewed as a vehicle through which she took what was most powerful about dance and put it in conversation with other artistic media's specific characteristics. It could also be seen as a decision that allowed for more financial stability post-1950 when the modern dance stage held increasingly less space for women engaged in formalist abstraction.

Shearer turned her attention to her company after the 1940s. She created works that were more immersed in formalist abstraction than her previous solos. She continued to travel back to New York annually until the mid-1950s. New York critics grew impatient with her opaque

choreography and unannounced program changes. In her Northbrook studio, though, she had the time, space, and resources with which she could create for herself, for her company, and in collaboration with Balfour Morrison. She was not fully divorced from modern dance's society. Prominent dancers and critics visited Northbrook and came to see Shearer's Chicago concerts. When her company disbanded in 1972, Balfour Morrison documented much of her repertoire in film that provided a glimpse into their artistic collaboration. Shearer developed a new career as a dance writer and critic after Balfour Morrison's death. In addition to her published writings, she produced an extensive oeuvre of writing on her artistic philosophies. Erdman and Shearer shifted paths after the 1940s. Their work during that decade, though, crucially intervened in the growing frame of abstraction as Americanist.

Conclusion:

The 1940s in US Modern Dance: A Time of Possibility, Constraint, and Diffusion

The 1940s was a time of possibility and constraint. Wartime mobilization enabled new definitions of United States citizenry that included minoritized ethnic and racial groups. A transnational mobilization against fascism provided a layer of galvanization for anti-racism activists in the US. At the same time, women entered the work force and challenged conventions for gendered labor. The Cultural Front and its broader Popular Front continued from the 1930s in multiple ways that aided redefinitions of US national identity by placing minoritized bodies as central in the nation. The decade's global transitions and transformations rendered it an optimal time for reimagining definitions of national identity with an attention to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

Modern dancers took part in these transformations. Pearl Primus, Sophie Maslow, and Eve Gentry staged broad definitions of Americanness. Primus built on the precedent of solos and solo recitals to serve as the way in which one could prove herself to be an American modern dancer. Through her choreography and many interviews, she enacted an Afro-diasporic Americanness grounded in transnational leftism. Both Maslow and Gentry innovated upon the various uses of the Americana frame as a way to assert a national identity and the bodies composite of that identity. Maslow harnessed Jewish socialism rooted in both Eastern Europe and Jewish immigrant enclaves in the US to propose an inclusive definition of American bodies in a socialist nation. Gentry also demonstrated an aesthetic resonant with Jewish socialism. For Gentry, satire and exaggeration could critique fraught ideas of the rural US as well as the institutionalized desires for those flawed imaginings. Possibilities for creating a new, leftist and

(proto-)feminist definition of Americanness seemed unstoppable in the early years of the decade. As the nation shifted from the war against fascism to the Cold War, however, these danced interventions in national identity took on subtler, yet still powerful, modes.

Abstraction and absolute dance had been in circulation since modern dance's earliest manifestations and took on a renewed importance in the latter half of the 1940s. The US, with its postwar status as a global superpower, sought to showcase select dance aesthetics as universal.[581] This tenet and its desire for non-subversive content impacted more than the dance companies that would later be chosen by the American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA) for state department-sponsored tours beginning in 1954. In addition to the looming Cold War, the Red Scare and Lavender Scare intensified at the end of the 1940s. These resulted in surveillance and name-calling of many prominent modern dancers. This combination of national forces spurred an obfuscation of dancers' subjectivities and dances' meanings for US modern dance. Formalist abstraction gradually (in a non-linear and incomplete way) became a key presentational frame. It also took on the role of standing as metonymic for American modern dance. The assumption of neutral bodies required by formalist abstraction's movement beyond confines of meaning, though, often failed for critics when danced by women or racialized artists. Primus tried again and again to stage her abstract dances with each attempt resulting in critics either writing of the pieces negatively or ignoring them completely. Jean Erdman and Sybil Shearer prioritized abstract movement exploration and medium specificity. Their works centered women in such a

---

[581] Clare Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Rebekah J. Kowal, *How to Do Things with Dance: Performing Change in Postwar America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010); Gay Morris, *A Game for Dancers: Performing Modernism in the Postwar Years, 1945-1960* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006); Victoria Phillips, *Martha Graham's Cold War: The Dance of American Diplomacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Naima Prevots, *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012).

way that led critics to characterize them (in sometimes contradictory ways) as too abstruse, emotional, or personal. In contrast to Primus, Erdman, and Shearer, Janet Collins did not attempt formalist abstraction, but was sometimes interpreted as such. Collins danced a specifically Creole Afro-diasporic definition of Americanness. A mixture of her light skin tone, ballet, and her African American, Jewish, and gender-bending content equipped her to be interpreted by critics in malleable ways. Critics applied Cold War aesthetics onto her and, in so doing, forsook her protest content. All of the women in this dissertation relied heavily on critical reception as they forged choreographic careers. In using presentational frames as the mechanism through which they made their interventions in modes of staging American bodies, this dissertation's case studies balanced comforting recognizability and threatening newness for critics. This negotiation enabled critics to decide how to interpret the women's works on a scale from neutral universality to specific subversion.

As a generation of artists following The Big Four (Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman) and its galvanization at the Bennington School of the Dance as well as leftist dancers who performed with the Works Project Administration, this dissertation's cohort of women innovated in pre-existing presentational frames. Primus and Erdman eventually crafted their own techniques. Their focus in the 1940s, though, was more on generating dances in conversation with their contemporaries than on establishing codified training regimes. New Dance Group's centrality during the 1940s was one key reason for this. All of the women who comprise this dissertation's case studies except for Shearer had an affiliation with the Group. Primus, Maslow, Gentry, and Erdman taught at the Group's school and took classes from one another. With this institution offering a myriad of dance techniques—

from those of The Big Four to various ethnic dance genres—the need to create and codify a unique technique was not pressing for New York-based modern dancers in the 1940s. That need surfaced in the end of the decade and in the 1950s. During that later time, modes of dance that had been the Group's biggest successes began to fall flat for critics, as evidenced by Maslow's *Champion*, and many key Group members left modern dance for other performance genres. The financial turmoil of modern dance in the 1940s, of which *Champion* was indicative, also gave way to the form's splintering and the departure of many women from it.

Where Did the Women Go?: A Diffusion of Modern Dance

Critics and scholars of 1940s US modern dance canonized far more (gay) white male choreographers who innovated techniques than women who made their choreographic debuts during the decade. Consequently, dominant narratives of 1940s US modern dance imply a decrease in women occupying dominant positions of the art form. When asking "where did the women go?" in an analysis of US modern dance in the 1940s, a couple of easy, yet incomplete, answers readily come to the fore. First, the rise in critical attention to male choreographers after the war could be attributed to the mere fact of men arriving home from the war and being able to dance or choreograph on the concert stage. Men were able to use their GI Bill funds to study dance, providing dance schools with a new wave of financially-viable students. This answer, though, elides the fact that modern dance had always been a women-dominated space. The return of men from World War I did not bring about a change in the centrality of women. In this way, the return of men from World War II could be a small part of the answer to "where did the women go?" but not nearly a full one. The advent of the Cold War could be taken as another partial answer. Cold War aesthetics' desire for neutral bodies and dances often refused female or

racialized bodies. Still, modern dance history evidenced women able to achieve critically-acclaimed absolute dance, such as that of Mary Wigman, Martha Graham, and Doris Humphrey. Additionally, many women attempted formalist abstraction to varying results, notably including Primus, Erdman, Shearer, Katherine Litz, and Midi Garth. While the postwar arrival of men and Cold War aesthetics offered partial answers to the decline in the prominence of women in modern dance, these answers were incomplete because the women did not disappear. Instead, I argue that many women of US modern dance took part in a diffusion of the form into ancillary artistic media. This move was part and parcel of modern dance's 1940s financial crisis consequent of diminished and merged patronage streams for the art form, as discussed in the Introduction of this dissertation. Rather than view 1940s modern dance as housing a decline in the prominence of women in the eyes of critics, I suggest it be considered as evidence of the resilience and ingenuity of female modern dancers.

Modern dance's financial crisis resulted in prominent choreographers disbanding their companies and/or moving to financially viable opportunities on the Broadway stage. Helen Tamiris, Holm, and Agnes de Mille quickly achieved success on Broadway and took notable modern dancers with them, including Primus and Collins. The concert dance fame of Tamiris, Holm, and de Mille lent a modicum of legitimacy to Broadway in the eyes of modern dance stakeholders reticent to accept the commercial stage as a suitable place for modern dancers. For example, when reviewing *Out of this World* (1950) directed by de Mille, choreographed by Holm, and danced by Collins, John Martin of the *New York Times* attributed the musical's success to the fact that of Holm's experience on the modern dance concert field, she does not

look down her nose at the Broadway medium."[582] He then went on to describe Collins's superb modern dance technique. Shortly following the close of the 1940s, Martin's review of *Out of this World* demonstrated how the decade separated concert modern dance from Broadway in classed terms. His comment was bolstered by earlier published writings of, for example, Erdman, Robert Horan, and Gertrude Lippincott, on the place (or lack thereof) of theatricalism in modern dance in contrast to Broadway.[583] Additionally, modern dancers' critiques of Broadway's commercialism, such as that of Gentry, and critics' writings on the dismal financial prospects of modern dance in comparison to the commercial stage also formed a chasm between modern dancers on the concert stage and on Broadway.[584] Despite these efforts to disentangle Broadway (and concomitantly theatricalism) from modern dance, the increasing presence of well-known modern dancers on Broadway troubled that divide, as seen in Martin's review of *Out of this World*.

The blurred border between modern dance and Broadway required those opposed to the commercial stage to excise its elements in common with modern dance on the concert stage. Crucially, this resulted in a disentanglement of theatricalism and formalist abstraction in US modern dance during the 1940s. Whereas previous dance scholarship has stressed the Cold War as the reason for modern dance's turn to universalism, objectivism, or formalism, I argue that the

---

[582] John Martin, "The Dance: Out of This World"," *New York Times*, 1951.
[583] Martha Coleman, "On the Teaching of Choreography: Interview with Jean Erdman," *Dance Observer* 19, no. 4 (April 1952): 52–53; Jean Erdman, "The Dance as Non-Verbal Poetic Image, Part I," *Dance Observer* 16, no. 4 (April 1949): 48–49; Jean Erdman, "Young Dancers State Their Views: As Told to Joseph Campbell," *Dance Observer* 15, no. 4 (April 1948): 40–41; Jean Erdman, "What Is Modern Dance?," *Vassar Alumnae Magazine*, February 1948; Robert Horan, "Poverty and Poetry in Dance," *Dance Observer* 11, no. 5 (May 1944): 52–54, 59; Gertrude Lippincott, "Will Modern Dance Become Legend?," *Dance Magazine*, November 1947.
[584] John Martin, "A Crisis in the Dance," *The American Scholar* 9, no. 1 (1940 1939): 115–20; "'Modern' Dance Devotees Present Concerts Heedless of Any Profit," *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*, November 6, 1949.

rise of modern dance on Broadway was just as important a cause for this change.[585] For example, modern dancers and writers against Broadway referenced (explicitly or implicitly) absolute dance and its medium specificity in opposition to Broadway's theatricalism, especially in terms of text and commercialism.[586] Whereas Gentry exaggerated and satirized Broadway choreography to mark herself in opposition to the commercial scene, more modern dancers adopted formalist abstraction as a mode of absolute dance that could not be interpreted as akin to Broadway.

Broadway's impact on US modern dance was geographically specific and impacted by the Cold War in gendered ways. The inextricable relation between the rise of modern dance on Broadway and modern dance's shift from theatricalism to formalist abstraction explained why this change did not take hold in Chicago as it did in New York. Although dance theatre held a strong Chicago presence for decades, the city did not experience the sudden threat of modern dancers abandoning the form for Broadway. The stakes of switching from theatricalism to formalist abstraction, therefore, were not felt in the same way in Chicago as they were in New York. As the Cold War approached, ostensibly neutral bodies became politically and socially efficacious in New York as the city became both US modern dance's hub and a prime site of state surveillance. As in the cases of Primus, Erdman, and Shearer, ideas of neutral bodies dancing movement untied from meaning failed when confronted with racialized and/or female-gendered artists. As a result, female modern dancers engaged in formalist abstraction either

---

[585] For attributions of modern dance formalist abstraction to the Cold War, see Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats*; Kowal, *How to Do Things with Dance*; Morris, *A Game for Dancers*.

[586] Sybil Shearer, *The Midwest Inheritance: The Autobiography of Sybil Shearer: Volume II* (Morrison-Shearer Foundation, 2012), 68; Coleman, "On the Teaching of Choreography: Interview with Jean Erdman"; Erdman, "The Dance as Non-Verbal Poetic Image, Part I"; Erdman, "Young Dancers State Their Views: As Told to Joseph Campbell"; Erdman, "What Is Modern Dance?"; Horan, "Poverty and Poetry in Dance"; Lippincott, "Will Modern Dance Become Legend?"

abandoned the genre, such as Primus, or received significantly less critical attention and acclaim than their male counterparts, as in the cases of Erdman and Shearer. Perhaps counterintuitively, women who at one time might have seemed opposed to Broadway migrated to it after their abstract work proved to be financially unviable. Holm might be considered as part of that wave as her modern dance was often interpreted as abstract (even when in Broadway musicals such as *Out of This World*) and she pursued a Broadway career after her company disbanded for financial reasons.

The simultaneously growing bridge and chasm between modern dance and Broadway necessitated a disentanglement of theatricalism and formalist abstraction. This change's political context in the latter half of the 1940s resulted in a racialization and gendering of the theatricalism/Broadway and formalist abstraction/concert modern dance divide with women and artists of color framed by critics as theatrically marked bodies and white male artists as neutral. Women choreographers did not abandon modern dance at the end of the 1940s. However, the number of prominent women producing work for the concert stage declined as many found (financially viable) homes for their modern dance on Broadway.

As some women of modern dance made their way to Broadway, others turned to the burgeoning genre of ethnic dance. As Rebekah Kowal has argued, the 1940s witnessed a rise of ethnic dance aided by US neo-imperialist agendas in the postwar era. Although some practitioners of ethnic dance never purported to be modern dancers, such as Hadassah or Le Meri, others blurred borders between the two forms or moved from modern dance to ethnic dance assignations. Those who moved between the two dance genres were aided by modern dance's history of inspiration and/or appropriation of dances of ethnicized or racialized Others,

such as early modern dancers Ruth St. Denis or Ted Shawn. This precedent rendered ethnically or racially marked dances as adjacent to, if not fitting on, the modern dance stage. Additionally, New Dance Group's offerings during the 1940s aided modern dancers' shift to ethnic dance. Primus and Erdman both taught in the ethnic dance division of the Group's school alongside Hadassah even as they achieved fame as modern dancers. In this way, 1940s modern dancers had models for simultaneous expertise in both what had been categorized as modern or ethnic artistic production. In fact, as evidenced by Erdman's extensive notes on disparate dance techniques and New Dance Group class notes, the divide between modern and ethnic dance was porous at the beginning of the decade.[587] Similar to the disentanglement of theatricalism and formalist abstraction due to the rise of Broadway, modern and ethnic dance also underwent a separation in the 1940s.

As both theatricalism and dances of overt identity representation became subtler during the 1940s, ethnic dance proved to be a site in which modern dancers could retain both of those aesthetic practices as well as mitigate state surveillance of their work. After Maslow's lack of success in *Champion* with its anti-imperialist intervention, she shifted to Jewish-themed works that fell within the category of ethnic dance. These works enabled her to evoke Jewish pride and continue her Jewish socialist ethos as filtered through settings of far-away eastern European Jewish shtetl life, a mode of living that had been severely impacted by the century's earlier pogroms. She continued her typical modern dance vocabularies and interracial casts. However, her adjustments of time and place for her pieces' settings rendered them safely out of state concerns and within ethnic dance's protection. Primus similarly made use of her existing

[587] Jean Erdman, "Jean Erdman Early Notebooks 1939-1947," 1947-1939, Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

practices in ethnic dance ways at the end of the decade. With the support of a Rosenwald Fellowship, she conducted ethnographic research in West Africa. Her trip to Africa significantly altered her career. She turned her focus to West African dance and ensemble pieces. Primus continued to perform some of her solos in the early 1950s, but their frequency and importance on her programs diminished over time. With the FBI following her because of her communist sympathies, this move to ethnic dance enabled Primus to continue many of her earlier Afro-diasporic artistic choices without the risk inherent in her overt protest works. Ethnic dance functioned as a site to which leftist or communist modern dancers could turn their efforts instead of the commercial Broadway stage. Steeped in the legacies of St. Denis, ethnic dance was an easy fit for female modern dancers engaged in work evocative of an Other place. Their move to the form allowed them continued success. At the same time, it lessened the number of women choreographing modern dance for the concert stage.

As women moved from the modern dance concert stage to Broadway and ethnic dance, they also assumed positions as university dance instructors. University dance programs grew exponentially during the 1940s. *New York Herald Tribune* dance critic Walter Terry conducted a survey of university dance programs in 1948 that illustrated that growth.[588] Whereas he only recorded fifty-nine colleges teaching dance when carrying out a similar survey in 1940, he found 105 such institutions in 1948.[589] In most of those 105 cases, the universities housed dance in departments of physical education. All but three of the 105 universities cited modern dance as

---

[588] Walter Terry, "Introductory Report on Status of Dance in American Colleges," *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*, March 14, 1948; Walter Terry, "Collegiate Institutions State Goals of Dance in Education," *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*, March 21, 1948; Walter Terry, "College Dance, Educators Speak of Dance Powers, Teaching Aims," *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*, March 28, 1948; Walter Terry, "Dance Courses in the Colleges Summary of Survey, Conclusion," *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*, April 4, 1948.
[589] Terry, "Introductory Report on Status of Dance in American Colleges."

their primary movement technique, evidencing the move of female modern dancers from the concert stage to the university classroom. For example, Erdman built on her early 1940s New Dance Group teaching experience when she transitioned to teach dance at Columbia University's Teachers' College in 1949.[590] She later continued the trailblazing path of Martha Hill in dance at New York University by taking on a founding director role at NYU's Dance Department in the 1960s and then employing Gentry as a Pilates teacher in the program.[591] The precedent set by The Bennington School of the Dance and The New School in the 1930s spurred the increased presence of dance in university settings during the 1940s. These new dance programs provided a stable income and stream of dancers for female modern dancers facing financial and artistic instability due to the decade's political and aesthetic transformations.

In addition to migrating into Broadway, ethnic dance, and university employment, many women modern dance choreographers shifted from an emphasis on solo work to ensembles. For instance, Primus, Gentry, Erdman, and Shearer formed companies. Maslow's group repertoire included fewer solos for herself. Collins maintained her soloist-star status, but joined a Broadway cast and then a ballet company. For these second-generation modern dancers and their contemporaries, careers away from their mentors' companies—usually The Big Four—entailed possibilities for showing themselves to be artists in their own right. The 92nd Street Young Men's-Young Women's Hebrew Association's (92Y) Audition Winners' Recital bolstered solos and solo recitals as the ways in which an aspiring artist could prove herself as a choreographer

---

[590] Jean Erdman, "Correspondence with Columbia University Teachers' College," 1949, Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
[591] Jean Erdman, "Correspondence with New York University," 1949, Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

and dancer. The importance of the solo recital frame in the early through mid-1940s catapulted some defectors from The Big Four into success and ended the careers of others.

The physical toll of solo recitals was great. As dancers aged, ensemble work proved a means through which they could still perform solos or communicate their artistic philosophy without the physical pressure of carrying an entire recital. Solo recitals might have been cheaper to produce than large-scale company productions, but they did not offer great financial return.[592] In this way, women who had financial support from a personal sponsor, such as Erdman or Shearer, were more able to continue to use the form than those who did not. Additionally, if an artist relied on solo recitals, she could not take a maternity or injury leave while her show continued. For example, Maslow and Jane Dudley performed solos and in ensemble works as part of the Dudley-Maslow-Bales trio. Press and programs on *Folksay* marked when Maslow's soloist role was covered by another dancer due to her maternity leave in 1945.[593] Similarly, press and artists' recollections of *Champion* mentioned the piece as Dudley's return to the concert stage after a maternity leave in 1948.[594] Maslow and Dudley were unhindered by their maternity leaves because their programs were able to go on without them and then readily accept them when they returned. This stood in stark contrast to many names I encountered in archival research that appeared to be gaining momentum as soloists and then disappeared from written records after notices that they would not be performing due to maternity leave or injury.

---

[592] For example, see "'Modern' Dance Devotees Present Concerts Heedless of Any Profit."
[593] For example, see "Dudley-Maslow-Bales Dance Trio: Freda Flier Replacing Sophie Maslow," 1945, Events, Education Department, 92nd Street Y Archives.
[594] For example, see Donald McKayle, *Transcending Boundaries: My Dancing Life* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 33.

Solo recitals were crucial for artists to gain critical attention in the 1940s, but were not sustainable for female dancers who sought to have children, lacked sponsorship, or felt the immense physical toll of consistently giving solo recitals. As the solo recital frame's importance deteriorated in the late 1940s, so too did the prominence of women who practiced it. Women who turned to groups—whether on Broadway, theatre, ballet, or Dance Notation Bureau—did not receive the same kind of critical acclaim they had as soloist choreographers-dancers. They were one name among many in a group instead of singular artistic geniuses. Other women who did not move to group work and were sidelined by maternity leave or physical health fell out of critics' notice. Rather than view women's turn to group work as a decline in their importance or numbers in US modern dance, I suggest that it be taken as evidence of their resilience. They found ways to accommodate their needs and desires outside of the instability of life as a solo recitalist.

The decline in the prominence of women choreographers in US modern dance during the 1940s had many causes. Broadway's financial opportunities, ethnic dance's possibilities for those flagged by national authorities as subversive, the growth of new university dance programs, the difficulties of solo recitals, and the critical focus on white (often queer) male bodies as the definition of abstraction during the Cold War worked as part and parcel of one another. These reasons together resulted in many women's strategic moves away from the modern dance concert stage. However, they did not completely depart from modern dance. They took modern dance vocabularies with them into their new arenas. The multiple directions women went in the 1940s lessened critical attention to them as dominant in any one genre. Women of US modern dance during the decade did not disappear, but they dispersed. They took up

possibilities afforded by the splintering that the art form underwent. In other words, I suggest that men did not suddenly surpass women modern dancers. Rather, the number of men in modern dance on the concert stage concentrated and that of women was re-distributed among other venues.

Women's Interventions in 1940s US Modern Dance

I argue that in their tactics of staging American bodies through intervening in existing presentational frames, Primus, Collins, Maslow, Gentry, Erdman, and Shearer troubled national borders. Primus, Collins, and Maslow all directly invoked transnational concerns in their dances and accompanying interviews. Gentry pointed to the absurdity of defining a nation and its requisite bodies in a single way. Erdman and Shearer staged women in such a way that highlighted a single woman in relation to only herself, rendering imagined national communities to be a hindrance rather that a source of belonging. These six women, I posit, cohered in their way of staging national identity as ultimately a porous and artificial construct. Just as the 1940s witnessed a diffusion of US modern dance, these women diffused the power of any single definition of national bodies.

It is possible to look at the 1940s works of Primus, Collins, Maslow, Gentry, Erdman, and Shearer and surmise that they failed in their ambitions during the decade. The nation did not become significantly more inclusive as the decade changed to the 1950s. It did not take on a socialist agenda and join into a transnational leftist coalition. Its borders strengthened, not opened. These women's interventions, however, offered enactments of new ways of imagining the nation and the bodies who comprised it. They might not have achieved large-scale social change, but they offered ways of understanding (trans)national injustices as well as embodiments

of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. In stretching presentational frames to stage Americanness, these women diffused the power of any one definition of national identity and modern dance. In staging Americanness, they proved the futility in attempting to define and represent national identity. As they shapeshifted at the end of the decade into different performance genres while taking their aesthetic and political stances with them, they demonstrated the porosity and artificiality of modern dance and national identity.

My dissertation decolonizes dance canons by attending to women whose interventions have been sidelined or written out by dominant narratives of modern dance. It shows how women danced against racism, homophobia, and fascism—dance content as urgent today as during the 1940s—in ways that pointed to the power of minoritized bodies to hold and carry forward histories of resistance and speculative futures. This dissertation extends the field of dance studies by demonstrating how marginalized artists maneuvered through and transformed time periods commonly understood as marked by stagnation. It also offers a model for understanding how dances of national identity could be used to offer transnational understandings of belonging. In examining where the women of US modern dance went during the 1940s, my dissertation contributes answers on how the art form shifted in political, financial, and aesthetic terms just before the turn to the latter half of the twentieth century.

Bibliography

"92 YM-YWHA Audition Winners' Recital Audition Form--Pearl Primus," 1943. Events, Education Department, Box 3, Dance Teachers' Advisory Committee 1941-42 Folder. 92nd Street Y Archives.

Ackerman, Mildred. "Sybil Shearer." *Dance Observer* 15, no. 7 (September 1948): 89–90.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London; New York: Verso, 2006.

"Background and Publicity Material on Janet Collins," 1949. Janet Collins Scrapbook, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Balcom, Lois. "Sybil Shearer." *Dance Observer* 8, no. 9 (November 1941): 124.

———. "Sybil Shearer and Katherine Litz." *Dance Observer* 11, no. 5 (February 1944): 21.

———. "The Negro Dances Himself." *Dance Observer* 11, no. 10 (December 1944): 122–24.

———. "Valerie Bettis and Pearl Primus." *Dance Observer* 11, no. 2 (February 1944): 15–16.

———. "What Chance Has the Negro Dancer?" *Dance Observer* 11, no. 9 (November 1944): 110–11.

Banerji, Anurima. *Dancing Odissi: Paratopic Performances of Gender and State*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2019.

Banes, Sally. *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance*. 2nd Edition. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987.

Beiswanger, George. "Lobby Notes and Jottings." *Dance Observer* 10, no. 4 (April 1943): 40, 44.

Blanco Borelli, Melissa. *She Is Cuba: A Genealogy of the Mulata Body*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Borowski, Felix. "Sybil Shearer's Program Shows Great Dance Talent." *The Chicago Sun*. April 10, 1943. Sybil Shearer Papers. Newberry Library.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 1979.

Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.

Brodkin, Karen. *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998.

Brooks, Bonnie. “Shearer, Sybil (1912–2005).” In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*, 1st ed. London: Routledge, 2016.

Brown, Ray C. B. “Series of Dance Recitals Climaxed by Sybil Shearer.” *The Washington Post (1923-1954)*. April 30, 1946.

Burke, Sidney. “Dance in Review: Janet Collins Dances Show Variety, Beauty.” *People’s World*. October 26, 1949. Janet Collins Scrapbook, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Callahan, Daniel M. “Accent, Choreomusicality, and Identity in Rodeo and ’Rōdē,ō.” In *Futures of Dance Studies*, edited by Manning, Susan, Janice Ross, and Rebecca Schneider, 135–53. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020.

———. “The Gay Divorce of Music and Dance: Choreomusicality and the Early Works of Cage-Cunningham.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 71, no. 2 (August 1, 2018): 439–525.

Campbell, Joseph. “Betwixt the Cup and the Lip.” *Dance Observer* 11, no. 3 (1944): 30–31.

———. “Text, or Idea?” *Dance Observer* 11, no. 6 (1944): 66, 75.

Carter, Michael. “Pearl Primus Dances Out Social Problems: Entertainer Attempts to Contribute to Interracial Understanding; Tours South to Study Actions in Church.” *Afro-American (1893-1988); Baltimore, Md.* July 22, 1944.

Cassidy, Claudia. “Five Dancers Collaborate in Varied Recital.” *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963); Chicago, Ill.* May 10, 1943.

Cherokee, Charley. “National Grapevine: Hold Your Hat.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*. April 30, 1949.

Chladek, James. “Dance On with Billie Mahoney, Eve Gentry, Part 1.” *Dance On with Billie Mahoney*. Kansas City: Dance on Video, 1990.

“Choreographic Works of Pearl Primus/Percival Borde,” n.d. Pearl Primus Collection. American Dance Festival Archive.

Cohen, Selma Jeanne. “Avant-Garde Choreography.” *Criticism* 3, no. 1 (1961): 16–35.

———, ed. *The Modern Dance: Seven Statements of Belief*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1965.

Coleman, Martha. “Janet Collins.” *Dance Observer* 16, no. 5 (May 1949): 69.

———. “On the Teaching of Choreography: Interview with Jean Erdman.” *Dance Observer* 19, no. 4 (April 1952): 52–53.

Collins, Janet. “Chaja Goldstein Acclaimed at American Debut at Y.” *The “Y” Bulletin*. December 21, 1949. 92Y Bulletin Archive.

Conrad, Earl. “Pearl Primus Tells Her Faith in Common People.” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967); Chicago, Ill.* January 6, 1945.

Cook, Susan C. “Pretty like the Girl: Gender, Race and Oklahoma!” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 19, no. 1 (February 1, 2009): 35–47.

Croft, Clare. *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

———. “Introduction.” In *Queer Dance: Meanings and Makings*, edited by Clare Croft, 1–33. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Daly, Ann. *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

“Dance Art Evokes Spell.” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), November 5, 1947.

“Dance Audition Winners, ’42-’50 at Y on March 4.” *The “Y” Bulletin*, February 28, 1941. 92 Y Bulletin Archive.

“‘Dance Festival.’” March 24, 1948. Clipping, Janet Collins Scrapbook, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

“Dance Festival at Mansfield Theatre, Daily Worker, May 23-27,” May 18, 1948.

“Dance Magazine Awards: The Outstanding Debutante of the Season 1948-1949 Janet Collins,” *Dance Magazine,* 1949. Janet Collins Scrapbook, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

“Dances at Museum by Sybil Shearer Are Rare, Creative,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, May 10, 1947. Sybil Shearer Papers. Newberry Library.

Das, Joanna Dee. *Katherine Dunham: Dance and the African Diaspora*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

DeFrantz, Thomas. *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Denby, Edwin. “Debut Dance Recital.” *New York Herald Tribune*. February 11, 1945.

———. "The Modern Dance Two Kinds." *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*. January 28, 1945.

Denning, Michael. *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. London; New York: Verso, 1997.

Desmond, Jane. "Dancing out the Difference: Cultural Imperialism and Ruth St. Denis's 'Radha' of 1906." *Signs* 17, no. 1 (Autumn 1991): 28–49.

Dier, Richard. "Story of a Great Dancer Who Has Been Graduated from Cafe Society into Big Time." *Afro-American (1893-1988); Baltimore, Md.* October 21, 1944.

D.M. "Dancer Enthralls Audience." *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 28, 1948. Sybil Shearer Papers. Newberry Library.

Dudley, Jane, and William Bales. Interview with William Bales and Jane Dudley, March 7, 1977. Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

"Dudley-Maslow-Bales Dance Trio: Freda Flier Replacing Sophie Maslow," 1945. Events, Education Department. 92nd Street Y Archives.

Duggan, Shirle. "Janet Collins' Artistry Gains," 1948. Janet Collins Scrapbook, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Emery, Lynne Fauley. *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today*. Second Edition. Hightstown: Princeton Book Company, 1989.

Erdman, Jean. "Correspondence with Columbia University Teachers' College," 1949. Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

———. "Correspondence with New York University," 1949. Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

———. *Dance & Myth - The World of Jean Erdman Part 1: The Early Dances*, 1998.

———. "Erdman Comments for Dances on Video," n.d. Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

———. "Erdman Early Notebooks," n.d. Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

———. "Erdman Notebooks 1944-1947," 1947 1944. Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

———. “Erdman Pocket Notebooks 1938-1945,” 1945 1938. Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

———. “Jean Erdman Early Notebooks 1939-1947,” 1947 1939. Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

———. “Production Materials-Early Works, Daughters of the Lonesome Isle-Ideas, Choreography Notes,” n.d. Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

———. Publicity Interviews, 1974 by Charles Olsen. Interview by Charles Olsen, 1974. Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

———. “The Dance as Non-Verbal Poetic Image.” In *The Dance Has Many Faces*, edited by Walter Sorell, 197–212. New York: The World Publishing Company, 1966.

———. “The Dance as Non-Verbal Poetic Image, Part I.” *Dance Observer* 16, no. 4 (April 1949): 48–49.

———. The Jean Erdman Video Project Transcript: Conversation with Nancy Allison. Interview by Nancy Allison, March 20, 1988. Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

———. “What Is Modern Dance?” *Vassar Alumnae Magazine*, February 1948.

———. “Young Dancers State Their Views: As Told to Joseph Campbell.” *Dance Observer* 15, no. 4 (April 1948): 40–41.

“Eve Gentry at Hunter Playhouse Program,” November 6, 1949. Katherine Wolfe Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1952.

Federal Bureau of Investigation. “FBI File on Pearl Primus,” 1944-1969.

“Five Dancers, The Dance Theatre of the YMHA Season 1942-1943 Audition Winners’ Recital, Program,” 1943. Events, Education Department, Box 3, Dance Teachers’ Advisory Committee 1941-42 Folder. 92nd Street Y Archives.

“Folksay Script,” 1944. Merry-Go-Rounders Records Box 3, Folder 3, Merry-Go-Rounders Record Box. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Foote, Horton. “Jean Erdman and Marie Marchowsky.” *Dance Observer* 12, no. 3 (March 1945): 33.

Foster, Susan, ed. *Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, Culture and Power*. London; New York: Routledge, 1995.

Foster, Susan Leigh. "Choreographies of Protest." *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 3 (October 17, 2003): 395–412.

Franko, Mark. *Martha Graham in Love and War: The Life in the Work*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

———. *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002.

Free to Dance Episode 2: "Steps of the Gods" (Part 1), 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcN0G7xItwo.

Freeman, Elizabeth. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Friedman, Jessica. "Universalizing the Specific: Janet Collins's *Spirituals* and *Genesis*." *Dance Chronicle* 45, no. 3 (2022).

———. "Dancing Sharecroppers: Jane Dudley's and Pearl Primus's Border Crossing Blues." In Border Crossings: Exile and American Dance, 1900 - 1955, edited by Ninotchka Bennahum and Bruce Robertson. New York: New York Public Library Press, Expected 2023.

———. "Theatricalism versus Formalism: Jean Erdman and Merce Cunningham in Chicago." In *Dancing on the Third Coast*, edited by Susan Manning and Lizzie Leopold. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, Expected 2024.

Gardner, Kara Anne. *Agnes de Mille: Telling Stories in Broadway Dance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Gentry, Eve. "Eve Gentry's Notes from Master Class with Michio Ito," June 5, 1933. Eve Gentry Papers.

———. "Impressions of the Danse," 1932. Eve Gentry Papers.

———. "The 'Original' Hanya Holm Company." *Choreography and Dance* 2, no. 2 (1992): 7–39.

George-Graves, Nadine. "Diasporic Spidering: Constructing Contemporary Black Identities." In *Black Performance Theory*, edited by Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez, 33–44. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

Gitelman, Claudia. “Introduction.” In *On Stage Alone: Soloists and the Modern Dance Canon*, edited by Claudia Gitelman and Barbara Palfy, 1–6. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014.

Gitelman, Claudia, and Randy Martin, eds. *The Returns of Alwin Nikolais: Bodies, Boundaries and the Dance Canon*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007.

Goff, Eleanor. “New Dance Group Festival.” *Dance Observer* 12, no. 7 (September 1945): 85–86.

Goldstein, Eric L. *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Goodman, Ezra. “Hard Time Blues.” *Dance Magazine*, April 1946, 30–31, 55–56.

———. “Nights Out: The Moderns: Limon, Fonaroff, Mata and Hari; the Jooss Ballet and a Number of New Musicals.” *Dance Magazine*, February 1947.

Gotlieb, Beatrice. “Making of an Institution.” *Theatre Arts Magazine*, February 1952. Sophie Maslow Research Materials, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Gottschild, Brenda Dixon. *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Graff, Ellen. *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.

Graham, Martha. “Seeking an American Art of the Dance.” In *Revolt in the Arts: A Survey of the Creation, Distribution and Appreciation of Art in America*, edited by Oliver Martin Sayler, 254–55. New York: Brentano’s, 1930.

Green, Richard C. “(Up)Staging the Primitive: Pearl Primus and ‘“the Negro Problem”’ in American Dance.” In *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, edited by Thomas DeFrantz, 105–39. Studies in Dance History. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.

Greenberg, Clement. “Modernist Painting.” In *Art and Culture; Critical Essays.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1961.

———. “Towards a Newer Laocoon.” In *Pollock and after: The Critical Debate*, edited by Francis Frascina, 2nd ed., 35–46. London; New York: Routledge, (1940) 2000.

Griffin, Farah Jasmine. *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists and Progressive Politics During World War II*. New York: Basic Books, 2013.

———. "Pearl Primus and the Idea of a Black Radical Tradition." *Small Axe* 17, no. 1 (2013): 40–49.

Guthrie, Woody. "Singing, Dancing, and Team-Work." *Dance Observer* 10, no. 9 (November 1943): 104–5.

Halberstam, J. Jack. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.

Hering, Doris. "Audition!" *Dance Magazine*, January 1946, 20, 37.

———. "Dudley-Maslow-Bales." *Dance Magazine*, May 1946, 17.

———. "Jean Erdman Finds a New Approach to Dance." *Dance Magazine*, May 1950.

———. "The Moderns in Concert." *Dance Magazine*, February 1946, 27, 40–45.

———. "The Season in Review." *Dance Magazine*, July 1948, 8–11, 31–33.

———. "The Season in Review." *Dance Magazine*, May 1949.

———. "While There Is Youth." *Dance Magazine*, January 1945, 10–11, 22.

Herridge, Frances. "Ballet of Prize Ring Pulls No Punches," n.d. Sophie Maslow Papers Clipping, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Horan, Robert. "Poverty and Poetry in Dance." *Dance Observer* 11, no. 5 (May 1944): 52–54, 59.

Horwitz, Dawn Lille. "Interview with Sybil Shearer," 1984. Sybil Shearer Papers. Newberry Library.

Hughes, Langston. "Contemplations on Two Movies Three Books and A Dancer." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*. May 7, 1949.

———. "Here to Yonder." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967); Chicago, Ill.* June 22, 1946, sec. Editorial Page.

———. "Letter from Langston Hughes to Eve Gentry," 1940s. Eve Gentry Papers.

———. "Silhouette." In *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Ernest Roessel, 305. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

———. "The Underground." *New Masses* 48, no. 13 (September 26, 1943): 14.

Hughes, Langston, Milton Meltzer, and Ossie Davis. *Black Magic: A Pictorial History of the African-American in the Performing Arts*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1967.

Ittelson, John, Hanya Holm, Julie Andrews, Nancy Mason Hauser, Chico California State University, University Foundation, Dance Horizons (Firm), and Video. *Hanya: Portrait of a Dance Pioneer*. Pennington: Dance Horizons, 2006.

Jackson, Naomi M. *Converging Movements: Modern Dance and Jewish Culture at the 92nd Street Y*. Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2000.

Jagose, Annamarie. *Lesbian Utopics*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

"Janet Collins," *Ebony*, September 1949.

"Janet Collins Creates Something 'New' In Dancing." *Atlanta Daily World* (1932-), November 10, 1948.

"Jean Erdman Press Release for 1949-1950 Season," 1949. Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

"Jean Erdman Professional Records," n.d. Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

John Cage, Our Spring Will Come (1943), 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DoItL4K0Q7g.

Johnson, Harriet. "Dudley-Maslow-Bales Trio and New Dance Group." *Dance Observer* 16, no. 3 (March 1949): 38.

Johnston, Jill. "The New American Modern Dance." In *The New American Arts*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz-Editor, 162–93. New York: Collier Books, 1965.

Jowitt, Deborah. "Rites for the Moribund." *The Village Voice*. July 12, 1988.

Jowitt, Deborah, Naomi Jackson, Carmen de Lavallade, Donald McKayle, Pearl Lang, Sophie Maslow, Carla Maxwell, and Nathan Kolodney. "Breaking Ground." December 5, 2000. https://92yondemand.org/breaking-ground-deborah-jowitt-naomi-jackson-carmen-de-lavallade.

Kastendick, Miles. "Dance Group Fresh, Skillful," n.d. Sophie Maslow Research Materials Clipping, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Kaufman, Will. *Woody Guthrie, American Radical*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011.

Kendrick, Lynne. *Theatre Aurality*. London: Springer, 2017.

Koenigsberg, Hilda. "In the Key of K." *The "Y" Bulletin*. February 26, 1943. 92 Y Bulletin Archive.

———. "In the Key of K." *The "Y" Bulletin*. March 19, 1943.

———. "Three Dancers." *The "Y" Bulletin*. December 11, 1942.

Kolodney, William. "Does the Modern Dance Have a Future?," 1941-1942. Events, Education Department, Box 3, Dance Teachers' Advisory Committee 1941-42 Folder. 92nd Street Y Archives.

———. Letter to Pearl Primus. "Letter from William Kolodney to Pearl Primus," November 23, 1942. Events, Education Department. 92nd Street Y Archives.

Kosstrin, Hannah. *Honest Bodies: Revolutionary Modernism in the Dances of Anna Sokolow*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

———. "Kinesthetic Seeing: A Model for Practice-in-Research." In *Futures of Dance Studies*, edited by Susan Manning, Janice Ross, and Rebecca Schneider, 135–53. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020.

Kowal, Rebekah J. *Dancing the World Smaller: Staging Globalism in Mid-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

———. *How to Do Things with Dance: Performing Change in Postwar America*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010.

Kraut, Anthea. *Choreographing Copyright: Race, Gender, and Intellectual Property Rights in American Dance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

———. "White Womanhood, Property Rights, and the Campaign for Choreographic Copyright: Loïe Fuller's Serpentine Dance." *Dance Research Journal* 43, no. 1 (ed 2011): 3–26.

Krayenbuhl, Pamela. "Celluloid Dances: How Chicago Women Documented Dance at Midcentury." In *Dancing on the Third Coast*, edited by Susan Manning and Lizzie Leopold. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, Expected 2024.

Krevitsky, Nik. "Audition Winners." *Dance Observer* 16, no. 3 (March 1949): 37–38.

———. "Eve Gentry and Nona Schurman." *Dance Observer* 16, no. 6 (July 1949): 85.

———. "Jean Erdman and Dance Company." *Dance Observer* 16, no. 3 (March 1949): 36.

Kun, Josh. *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Landsman, Matilda. “Pearl Primus Here in Double Recital.” *The “Y” Bulletin*. November 6, 1946.

Larkey, Joan. “Eve Gentry.” *Dance Observer* 16, no. 10 (December 1949): 152–53.

Leopold, Lizzie. “Sybil Shearer: An Archive in Motion.” In *Dancing on the Third Coast*, edited by Susan Manning and Lizzie Leopold. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, Expected 2024.

Lewin, Yaël Tamar, and Janet Collins. *Night’s Dancer: The Life of Janet Collins*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011.

Lippincott, Gertrude. “Will Modern Dance Become Legend?” *Dance Magazine*, November 1947.

Lloyd, Margaret. “News of Music--Sybil Shearer Makes Debut in Boston: Dancer Presents Solo Program at New England Mutual Hall.” *The Christian Science Monitor (1908-)*. February 19, 1948.

———. *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance.* Brooklyn: Knopf, 1949.

Lomax, Louis. “7,000 See Pearl Primus in Dance.” *Afro-American (1893-1988); Baltimore, Md.* June 17, 1944.

Long, Richard A. *The Black Tradition in American Dance*. New York: Rizzoli, 1989.

Madison, D. Soyini. “Foreword.” In *Solo/Black/Woman: Scripts, Interviews, and Essays*, edited by E. Patrick Johnson and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, xi–xiv. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013.

Manning, Susan. “Ausdruckstanz across the Atlantic.” In *Dance Discourses: Keywords in Dance Research*, edited by Susanne Franco and Marina Nordera, 46–60. London: Routledge, 2016.

———. *Danses Noires/Blanche Amerique*. Paris: Centre national de la danse, 2008.

———. *Ecstasy and the Demon: The Dances of Mary Wigman*. Second Edition. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

———. *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

Martin, John. “A Crisis in the Dance.” *The American Scholar* 9, no. 1 (1940 1939): 115–20.

———. *America Dancing: The Background and Personalities of the Modern Dance*. New York: Dodge, 1936.

———. “Dance.” *Mademoiselle*, November 1943. Sybil Shearer Papers. Newberry Library.

———. “Dance Fete Offers Four Group Works: Jane Dudley, Sophie Maslow, William Bales Seen with Unit at New London Matinee.” *New York Times*. 1948.

———. “Jean Erdman Seen in 2 Novel Dances: Shares Spotlight of Program with Anthony and Gifford -- ‘Champion’ Is Presented.” *New York Times*. May 27, 1948.

———. “New Dance Group Offers Novelties: Eva Gentry Makes Her First Appearance -- Hadassah Also Featured on Program.” *New York Times*. May 26, 1948.

———. “The Dance: Americana: Stability of the Native Art as Evidenced by Sophie Maslow’s ‘Folksay.’” *New York Times*. December 6, 1942.

———. “The Dance: Five Artists.” *New York Times*. 1943.

———. “The Dance: Newcomer: Janet Collins in a Brief but Auspicious Debut.” *New York Times*. February 27, 1949.

———. “The Dance: Out of This World".” *New York Times*. 1951.

———. “The Dance: Surfeit: An Overgenerous Festival by New Dance Group.” *New York Times*. June 6, 1948.

———. “The Dance: Year’s Awards: Season’s Laurels to Antony Tudor and Sybil Shearer -- Week’s Events.” *New York Times*. June 14, 1942.

———. *The Modern Dance*. Brooklyn: Dance Horizons, 1933.

Maslow, Sophie. “Choreography Notes-Champion,” n.d. Sophie Maslow Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

———. Interview with Sophie Maslow, 1976. Sophie Maslow Interview. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York.

———. Sophie Maslow Interview, 1976. Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Maximovna, Elena. “Second Generation Modern.” *Dance Magazine*, November 1942, 21, 32.

Mcclintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

McDonagh, Don. *The Rise and Fall and Rise of Modern Dance*. New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1970.

———. *The Rise and Fall and Rise of Modern Dance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970.

McKayle, Donald. *Transcending Boundaries: My Dancing Life*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

McPherson, Elizabeth. *The Bennington School of the Dance: A History in Writings and Interviews*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2013.

New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962). "'Modern' Dance Devotees Present Concerts Heedless of Any Profit." November 6, 1949.

Moreno, James. *Dances of José Limón and Erick Hawkins*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2020.

Morris, Gay. *A Game for Dancers: Performing Modernism in the Postwar Years, 1945-1960*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006.

———. *A Game for Dancers: Performing Modernism in the Postwar Years, 1945-1960*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006.

Morrison, Helen Balfour, and Sybil Shearer. *In a Vacuum*. Northbrook, Ill., n.d. https://www.chicagofilmarchives.org/collections/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/16110.

———. *No Peace on Earth*. Northbrook, Ill., n.d. https://www.chicagofilmarchives.org/collections/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/16672.

———. *O Lost*. Northbrook, Ill., n.d. https://www.chicagofilmarchives.org/collections/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/16668.

Nash, Joe. "Joe Nash: Oral History with Peggy Schwartz, December 18, 1995." Accessed October 30, 2020. http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums912-s02-i006.

Newhall, Mary Anne Santos. "Dancing in Absolute Eden." The University of New Mexico, 1998. http://www.proquest.com/docview/230828249?accountid=12861.

———. "Uniform Bodies: Mass Movement and Modern Totalitarianism." *Dance Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (ed 2002): 27–50.

Noland, Carrie. *Merce Cunningham: After the Arbitrary*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020.

"Onwin Borde, Percussionist Who Worked in Dance, Dies at 51," *The New York Times*. June 5, 2006, sec. Arts. https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/05/arts/music/05borde.html.

"People and Ideas: Before Band Wagons," *Vogue*, August 15, 1949.

Perelman, Josh. "'I'm the Everybody Who's Nobody, I'm the Nobody Who's Everybody': How Sophie Maslow's Popular Front Choreography Helped Shape American Jewish Identity." In *Seeing Israeli and Jewish Dance*, edited by Judith Brin Ingber, 89–98. Raphael Patai Series in Jewish Folklore and Anthropology. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011.

Perpener, John O. *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005.

Phillips, Victoria. *Martha Graham's Cold War: The Dance of American Diplomacy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Pomeroy, R. "Sybil Shearer: A Participation," n.d. Sybil Shearer Papers. Newberry Library.

Poster, William. "Dance Festival." *The New Republic*, January 21, 1946. Jean Erdman Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Prevots, Naima. *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012.

Prickett, Stacey. "From Workers' Dance to New Dance." *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 7, no. 1 (1989): 47–64.

Primus, Pearl. Dancer: Pearl Primus. Interview by Elisa Wrenn, 1982. Pearl Primus Collection. American Dance Festival Archive.

"Program from Jean Erdman and Merce Cunningham in Dance Recital at The Arts Club of Chicago," 1943. John Cage Collection. Northwestern University Special Collections.

"Program Notes for The Dance Center of the YM-YWHA Presents Janet Collins," 1949. Janet Collins Clippings, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

"Program Order for 92nd Street YM-YWHA Five Dancers Recital," n.d. Box 3, Five Dancers Folder, Events Education Department Collection. 92nd Street Y Archives.

Rea, E. "Encores and Echoes: College Graduates Debut as Piano Team Canada Lee Admits Coming Altar Trek." *Afro-American (1893-1988); Baltimore, Md.* May 20, 1944.

Román, David. *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS*. Unnatural Acts. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.

Rossen, Rebecca. *Dancing Jewish: Jewish Identity in American Modern and Postmodern Dance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Sabin, Robert. “Reviews of the Month: Jane Dudley, Sophie Maslow, William Bales.” *Dance Observer* 9, no. 4 (April 1942): 47.

Schwadron, Hannah. *The Case of the Sexy Jewess: Dance, Gender, and Jewish Joke-Work in US Pop Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Schwartz, Peggy, and Murray Schwartz. *The Dance Claimed Me: A Biography of Pearl Primus*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

Scolieri, Paul A. *Ted Shawn: His Life, Writings, and Dances*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Shapiro, Vivian. “Dance Recital Lauded Dudley, Maslow, and Bales Feature Americana Performance.” *The “Y” Bulletin*. May 8, 1942.

Shea Murphy, Jacqueline. *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Shearer, Sybil. “Audience,” n.d. Sybil Shearer Papers. Newberry Library.

———. An Interview with Sybil Shearer. Interview by Carol Doty, May 19, 1976. Sybil Shearer Papers. Newberry Library.

———. “Doris Humphrey,” n.d. Sybil Shearer Papers. Newberry Library.

———. “Letter to Agnes DeMille,” 1967. Sybil Shearer Papers. Newberry Library.

———. “Letter to Lincoln Kirstein,” 1987. Sybil Shearer Papers. Newberry Library.

———. “Sorting Out Lincoln Kirstein and the Twentieth Century.” *Ballett International*, January 1988. Sybil Shearer Papers. Newberry Library.

———. *Sybil Shearer: Creative Dancer*, 1943. Sybil Shearer Papers. Newberry Library.

———. *The Midwest Inheritance: The Autobiography of Sybil Shearer: Volume II*. Morrison-Shearer Foundation, 2012.

———. *Without Wings the Way Is Steep: The Autobiography of Sybil Shearer, Vol. 1*. First Edition. Northbrook, Ill.: Morison-Shearer Foundation, 2006.

Shearer, Sybil, and John Martin. “Sybil Shearer Correspondence with John Martin,” n.d. Sybil Shearer Papers. Newberry Library.

Shelton, Suzanne. *Divine Dancer: A Biography of Ruth St. Denis*. New York: Doubleday, 1981.

Sidbury, Mercy. *Eve Gentry: Kaleidoscopic History*. Edited by Jeff Friedman. San Francisco: Museum of Performance and Design, 1991.

Smith, Cecil. "Young Dancers Give Program Empty of Merit." *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963); Chicago, Ill.* February 15, 1943.

Smith, Constance. "Dance Letter." *The Kenyon Review* VIII, no. 4 (Autumn 1946): 689–90.

Soares, Janet Mansfield. *Martha Hill and the Making of American Dance*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010.

Son, Elizabeth. *Embodied Reckonings: "Comfort Women," Performance, and Transpacific Redress*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018.

Srinivasan, Priya. *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011.

———. "The Bodies beneath the Smoke, or What's behind the Cigarette Poster: Unearthing Kinesthetic Connections in U.S. Modern Dance." *Discourses in Dance* 4, no. 1 (2007): 7–48.

Stanger, Arabella. *Dancing on Violent Ground: Utopia as Dispossession in Euro-American Theater Dance*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021.

"Sweethearts of Servicemen of American Youth for Democracy: A Salute to Our Fighting Boys Rally," n.d. Katherine Wolfe Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

"Sybil Shearer, Civic Theatre, Chicago, April 2," *Dance News*, May 1948. Sybil Shearer Papers. Newberry Library.

Taylor, Diana. *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War."* Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.

———. *The Archive and the Repertoire*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Terry, Walter. "College Dance, Educators Speak of Dance Powers, Teaching Aims." *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*. March 28, 1948.

———. "Collegiate Institutions State Goals of Dance in Education." *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*. March 21, 1948.

———. "Contributions Of Two Young Modern Dancers: Dance Satirists." *New York Herald Tribune*. December 15, 1946.

———. "Dance: An Impressive Debut; A Canadian Ballet Festival." *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*. February 27, 1949.

———. “Dance Courses in the Colleges Summary of Survey, Conclusion.” *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*. April 4, 1948.

———. “Introductory Report on Status of Dance in American Colleges.” *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*. March 14, 1948.

———. “New Dance Group: Eve Gentry Joins Festival Does Four Solos.” *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*. May 26, 1948.

———. “Sybil Shearer Seen in Debut as Solo Dancer: Young Artist’s Program at Carnegie Chamber Hall Is One of Varied Moods.” *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*. October 22, 1941.

———. “The Ballet: Exciting Revival.” *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*. November 28, 1949.

———. “The Dance.” *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*. May 4, 1946.

———. “The Dance.” *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*. July 10, 1949.

———. “The Dance World: 3 Days of Dance Magic Given by Jose Limon, Janet Collins.” *New York Herald Tribune (1926-1962)*. April 10, 1949.

“The Champion,” *Life Magazine*, n.d. Sophie Maslow Research Materials, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

“The Dance Center of the YM-YWHA Presents Janet Collins, Program,” 1949. Events, Education Department, Box 5. 92nd Street Y Archives.

The New Dance Group Gala Historical Concert: Retrospective 1930s - 1970s. Dancetime Publications, 1993.

Thompson, Vickie. “Pearl Primus Dancers’ Feet Infected Declares Tour’s ‘Grossly Mishandled’: Production Drags; Dancer Plans Suit.” *New York Amsterdam News (1943-1961), City Edition*. February 10, 1945.

Tish, Pauline. “Helen Tamiris.” Jewish Women’s Archive. Accessed January 26, 2023. https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/tamiris-helen.

UW Department of Dance. *Volume: 5 Eve Gentry: Tenant of the Street*. Accessed August 4, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZQAMF8FgSc.

Vaughan, David, and Merce Cunningham. *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*. New York, NY: Aperture, 2005.

Vintage video clips. *Janet Collins (Dancer) - after the Mardi Gras (1949)*, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YILsJ9Rbwk.

Washburn, Patrick S. "The Pittsburgh Courier's Double V Campaign in 1942." *American Journalism* 3, no. 2 (April 1986): 73–86.

"What Dancers Think about the German Dance," *Dance Magazine*, May 1931.

White, Al. "Broadway Finds Another 'Queen'; First Nighters Another 'Sender': She's Pretty Janet Collins of Play, 'Out Of This World.'" *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*. March 24, 1951.

Wiley, Hannah C. *Volume 8: Jean Erdman: Creature on a Journey*, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZ3h6OixWIM.

Wolfe, Katherine. "Eve Gentry Biography." n.d. Katherine Wolfe Papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

———. "Sybil Shearer," 1955. Sybil Shearer Papers. Newberry Library.

Yarber, Angela. "Embodied Activism: Israeli Folk Dance Creating Social Change in the Jewish Community." *Implicit Religion* 16, no. 3 (2013): 289–300.

"YM-YWHA Audition Winners' Concert, Program," 1949. Events, Education Department, Box 5. 92nd Street Y Archives.