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Closets Full of Dances: Modern Dance’s Performance of Masculinity and Sexuality

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Matthew Bourne’s sensational­ly popular “gay male” Swan Lake premiered in London’s West End in September 1995, eventually breaking box office records for longest-running production set by Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes. Using the original Tchaikovsky score and a modern dance vocabulary that only occasionally invokes ballet, Bourne has re-envisioned the famous romance between the Prince and the Swan Queen as the coming-out story of a gay prince, dominated by his mother, who finds no satisfaction in the royal regiments or underground getaways that comprise his life. On the verge of suicide he instead dreams himself into a world inhabited by magical creatures, male swans whose sensual strength and sinuous vulnerability promise sexual and emotional satisfaction. Swan, part of this all-male corps de ballet, reciprocates his affections in a series of duets, tender, passionate, and erotic, yet their attachment is finally severed by the two separate societies to which they belong. The Prince’s court cannot accept his homosexuality and condemns him first to the asylum and then to the sickbed; Swan’s cohorts cannot forgive his dalliance with a mere mortal. In the final scene Swan, hounded by his fellow swans, scoops the dying prince into his arms and ascends heavenward, presumably toward a world where they might live happily ever after.

Exhilarating, epic, entertaining, the production elicits enormous sympathy for the gay male couple. The Prince’s severely constrained life and inarticulate feelings resonate strongly with the closetedness of homosexuality in dance and in society. Swan’s bravery and vulnerability evoke the kind of admiration reserved
for the noblest of heroes. The corps de ballet, hairy chested, gangly, athletic, sweaty, and sexy, summons up an Otherness—magical, menacing, seductive, enthralling—that the female entourage in the original production must have achieved but can no longer sustain. When the male swans appear, one by one, cavorting to some of Tchaikovsky’s most famous phrases, they seem to burst through the closet’s door. Rather than a diminution of their power, through endless duplication the addition of each swan connotes yet another celebratory coming out.

Part of the production’s dazzling success is sustained by its witty references to the original ballet. Bourne’s clever choreography keeps viewers in continual and delighted suspense as to how he has altered the well-known scenario. Swan, for example, reappears in Act III, not as the Black Swan but as a leather-clad bounder who puts the make on the mother. Bourne also uses to dazzling effect imaginative sets, costumes, and a movement vocabulary drawn from social, club, and folk dance traditions as well as several schools within modern dance. Beyond this impressive display of craft, the dance’s greatest achievement is its synthesis of wit, spectacle, and social cause. This is a dance with a clear and timely message delivered with such deft agility and beguiling seduction as to win over the most hardened homophobe.

For all my assertions as to the gay male meaning of the piece, critical coverage in both Britain and the United States has consistently ignored its brazenly open treatment of this taboo subject. Nor does Bourne commit to a homosexual reading of his work, claiming instead a more universal significance in which Swan represents for the Prince the “freedom, the beauty and the strength...that he’s not got in his restrictive Royal life.” Although Bourne, in an interview for the gay male newspaper Edge, happily notes the gay male interpretation, he prefers a reading of the swans as more transcendent figures:

Well, you know, there’s a lot of panic around whether it gets dubbed that. When we first announced that we were doing it—because we’ve got male swans and still have a prince—the actual assumption was that it’s obviously the gay Swan Lake, which is true up to a point. It can be seen as that, which we’re happy about as well. But really, it’s about someone, the prince, who can’t be what he wants to be. It certainly suits the story and it works completely on that level. Gay audiences who come and see it can read it that way and love it because of that. Obviously, it’s something they can identify with, and there isn’t an enormous amount of things you can go and see and have that kind of relationship with. So it’s there. But what I’ve tried to do is make it more universal.

Critical reviews sustain Bourne’s intent by consistently failing to mention any homosexual references.

Both the dance, in its sensuous representation of same-sex desire, and the criticism, in its uncanny neglect of obvious homosexual content, bring into sharp relief modern dance’s closeting of homosexuality throughout this century. The production’s scale and enormous popularity illuminate with astonishing clarity just how little sexual desire, much less homosexual desire, the modern dance tradition has ever staged. For one hundred years, modern dancers and choreographers have resisted all allegations that their art alluded, however discreetly or remotely, to sex. Early American luminaries in the new genre, Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis, went to enormous lengths to elaborate in and for dance a nonsexualized corporeality. Subsequent generations of choreographers and dancers likewise cultivated the body as a musculoskeletal system that responded to emotional but never sexual impulses. Only toward the end of the century did dances begin to elucidate clear sexual identities and desires on stage, and in large part, this choreographic initiative has centered on gay male identity. Living through the gay liberation movement and the AIDS crisis, choreographers Bill T. Jones, David Rousseve, Nigel Charnock, Lloyd Newson, Javier de Frutos, along with Bourne and many others, have begun to press hard on the closet walls.

At the beginning of the century, modern dance’s closet, one that housed what studies of human sexuality had only recently identified as the homosexual, formed a part of the very foundation of this new dance genre. In order to secure their experimental aesthetic claims, the earliest modern choreographers strategically positioned their dances as far from the sexual as possible. Because they were women, because they were performing pub-
licly new kinds of bodily movement, the presumption of immoral, illicit, or prurient elements in their work jeopardized the entire project. Their solution, to create a chaste dancing, ensured success and at the same time offered a haven for homosexuality. Not only was homosexuality protected because the dances were never about sex but choreographers and dancers could explore movement in new ways that might simultaneously encode the sexual, whether heterosexual or homosexual, and articulate a nonsexual physicality.

Unlike ballet, a form of bodily display whose reputation could be partially salvaged through references to chivalric codes and aristocratic comportment and whose tradition extended back over generations, the new modern dance, with its emphasis on individual creativity, required new forms of justification. A company such as the Ballets Russes, in its revitalization of ballet through lavish exoticist spectacle, could feature a dancer such as Nijinsky by using as rationale the equation between deviance and artistic brilliance. In contrast, the modern dance elaborated an antisexual environment in which choreographers and dancers formulated alternative identities, both aesthetic and physical. This modern dance's closet, even as it allowed viewers to project a sexualized identity onto the dancers, assured them that the choreographic basis for such fantasy did not exist because dance and dancers resolutely pursued a nonsexual investigation of human movement.

This essay examines four distinct closets in the history of modern dance as exemplified in the choreographic projects of Ted Shawn, Merce Cunningham, Mangrove, and Matthew Bourne. The field in which these men worked was, until recently, dominated by female choreographers and dancers, and it focused on the "woman's" work of investigating psychological interiority and cultivating the body. Dismissed by many as vulgar exhibitionism or ephemeral nonsense, it was marked as a feminine pursuit and denigrated accordingly. Beginning with Shawn, male choreographers in modern dance have necessarily contributed choreographic solutions that simultaneously pioneered within the field, asserted masculinity, and closeted homosexuality. Unlike female choreographers, whose sexual orientation, immersed in the gynocentric preoccupations of the tradition, never posed an obvious problem, male choreographers have contended with the prejudice that a man dancing is unmanly, hence deviant, effeminate, and probably homosexual. Analysis of these male choreographers' initiatives thus brings the contours of modern dance's closet into focus.

In order to sharpen this focus still further, each of the four choreographic projects considered here is situated with respect to theories of homosexuality of the same historical moment. Both the research on sexuality and the choreography postulated similar kinds of subjectivities and corporealities, constructing from them explanations of homosexual behavior and a closeted version of that behavior in danced form. In the history of twentieth-century sexology the epistemological foundations for rationalizing homosexuality shifted many times, as did the closet of the homosexual. Modern dance has staged with consummate clarity the embodied version of the closet's changing epistemology.

By situating choreography and sexology side by side, I want to argue for parity of the two practices as forms of knowledge production that theorize identity and corporeality. By comparing one with the other, I hope to show how each makes similar kinds of theoretical moves. The sexologies do not provide the context within which to interpret a choreographer's motivation or intent. Rather, authors and choreographers, sexologies and dances, are evaluated as discursive sites that register a social and corporeal politics. As discourses both dances and sexologies open themselves to many spectatorships, many readings, and I have alluded to this multiplicity of interpretations by also providing one "alternative" response to each choreographic closet. Before turning to an examination of these closets, however, this essay considers the climate of concerns around the body, movement, and gender in which modern dance was founded.

CHASTE DANCING

Alongside the wide variety of movement practices that engaged turn-of-the-century Americans as participants and viewers—new
forms of physical education and expressive culture, Delsarte exhibitions, pageants, folk dance performances, dances of the world as seen at the world fairs and expositions—choreographers Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis began to elaborate an entirely new vision of dancing. This new approach to dancing and dance making, a “high” art form radically distinct from ballet, on the one hand, and vaudeville, cabaret, or follies entertainments, on the other, promised a glimpse of the human soul, its changingness, its transcendent veracity. Duncan and St. Denis, not the first or only progenitors of this exceptional artistic initiative, stand as monumental emblems of its success. Offering contrasting visions of the soul’s corporeal manifestations, Duncan in her austere Greeklike toga and St. Denis in her ornate orientalist veils invited audiences to celebrate a body unencumbered by the artifices of society, a body tuned to inner spiritual rhythms. An extraordinary accomplishment, especially for women, the new artistic genre they helped to found imbued the body with a dignity and beauty that gave life new meaning.

Responses to Duncan’s dancing repeatedly betrayed the viewer’s surprise at the remarkable chasteness of her performance. Her nearly naked body purveyed no erotic allure, no stimulation of physical desire. Through her gaze and gestures she communicated her conviction that the body constituted a hallowed place. Through her shaping of and in space, she trained viewers to attend to the sculptural potential of movement. Not only did she resemble a work of classical art but she articulated a new yet classical movement aesthetic. She did not promenade like a showgirl or pose fetchingly like a ballerina. Instead, she commanded viewers to focus on the way the body moved in tandem with the music, and she persuaded them that this movement tracked that of the soul.

To buttress the claims she was making choreographically, Duncan expounded verbally and in writing on her vision of a new American dance. She drew upon the dignity of the body summoned up in Hellenistic humanism and in the poetry of Walt Whitman. She fashioned an idiosyncratic feminism, one that championed the body’s freedom from the constraints of dress and social comportment, and she embraced Nietzschean philosophy and its use of dance as metaphor for life and change. She also tapped the country’s desire to witness a uniquely American artistic production, envisioning the lithe and healthy body of “American Dancing.” At the same time she railed against ballet, with its rigid patterns and barren imagery, and she denigrated African dance, as exemplified by Negro dances, for its lascivious simplicity. Both traditions resonated with sexual connotations that Duncan was eager to avoid. The ballerina as kept woman signaled the decadent trajectory of ballet’s form, the inevitable product of a stultifying society such as Europe’s. The African dancer, possessed by a sexual frenzy, demonstrated a primitive and unrefined variety of bodily responsiveness against which Duncan asserted her own naturalistic cultivation of the body. Duncan used both traditions to distinguish her new danced vision, effectively organizing racist and nationalist sentiments to reinforce one another.

Whereas Duncan epitomized a white America dancing, St. Denis, an amalgam of orientalist types incarnate, bolstered nationalist and racist discourses not through her depiction of the white body as universal but through her effective appropriation of other dance traditions. Tapping America’s extensive interest in religious experimentation, the impetus to reevaluate spiritual practices in light of new exposure to world religions, St. Denis choreographed religious quests set in exotic Asian lands. She deployed sumptuous spectacle as the environment for her spiritual exploration, initially reinforcing viewers’ expectations of standard exoticist entertainment. Yet her movement and phrasing, all uncannily dissimilar from other vaudeville performances, soon forced a different kind of attention. She paused for too long; she evinced too much concentration; the stunt never materialized. Instead, viewers witnessed the representation of spiritual awakening. And although the narrative of her quest propelled the body toward ecstatic obliviousness, St. Denis consistently subverted and sublimated any sexual connotations that her delirium might suggest.

Like Duncan’s reception, St. Denis’s reviews often commented on the quantity of exposed midriff but went on to stress the spiritual essence of her dancing. To portray religiosity on stage and to
do so convincingly provided the ultimate refutation of any sexual innuendo. Yes, viewers might have reasoned, she danced the pilgrimage of an Eastern and not Christian devotee, but all religions shared a dedication to spiritual rather than carnal experience. Yes, she appeared in uncontrolled and uncontrollable ecstasy, but she always retreated into solitude after communing with her god. Yes, she assumed a foreign character, but, after all, she was a white woman who merely represented this foreignness, demonstrating, as one critic observed, “a universal rhythm beneath the broken chaos of our modern industrial world which shall infuse new joy and rhythmic harmony into our common life.”

The antisexual tactics developed in Duncan’s and St. Denis’s choreography, infused with racist and nationalist sentiments, provided the necessary defense against the inevitable charges that their performances purveyed only the trivial or lurid. By ensuring the absence of sexuality, these women could display a new body-centered endeavor, found a new genre of dancing. Yet it is worth examining in greater detail just what kinds of assumptions Duncan and St. Denis were working with and against in their campaign to create a whole new kind of dance, a newly respectable view of dance. Why were viewers so surprised at how chaste their dancing was? What did they expect to see that Duncan and St. Denis repeatedly subverted?

THE CUPIDITY OF THE FLESH

The writings of humanist, sexologist, and dance aficionado Havelock Ellis provide an extraordinary view of the epistemological relatedness of dance and sexuality at the beginning of the twentieth century. In his most popular and bestselling book, *The Dance of Life*, and in his earlier sexologies, Ellis demonstrates clearly the kinds of racist and colonialist prejudice that Duncan and St. Denis reiterated, as well as the sexist prejudice that they had to refute, all in an effort to create a new kind of dancing. It is worth examining his theories of dance in some detail, because many of their underlying presumptions continue to inform the status of dance in politics, religion, and education throughout the twentieth century.

For Ellis, dancing expresses religious belief, amorous zeal, or aesthetic inquiry. The origin of all forms of dancing, however, regardless of their function, lies in the sexual impulses of animals. Of the “two primary arts,” dancing and building, dancing is perhaps the first because “the nest of birds is the chief early form of building, and . . . the nest may first have arisen as an accidental result of the ecstatic sexual dance of birds.” Species as primitive as insects evidence the inclination to dance as part of their courtship rituals. The urge to mate, that which inspires the spastic jerks of the chimpanzee’s feeble legs, is the crude motion out of which “the heavenly alchemy of evolution has created the divine movements of Pavlova,” Ellis writes. Not only does dancing originate in mating impulses, Ellis says, but competence at dancing facilitates the conquest of woman by man: “By his beauty, his energy, his skill, the male must win the female, so impressing the image of himself on her imagination that finally her desire is aroused to overcome her reticence. That is the task of the male throughout nature, and in innumerable species besides Man it has been found that the school in which the task may best be learnt is the dancing-school.” Thus dancing, according to Ellis, makes manifest the most primitive sexual urgings, heterosexual urgings, which are common across the whole evolutionary continuum from arthropods to bipeds.

Yet, Ellis argues, in order to develop the facility at dancing necessary for sexual conquest, the body must be disciplined, its most unruly parts must be subjected to the rigors of measure, proportion, and rhythm. Dances of the world evidence different approaches to this disciplining process, but African dance distinguishes itself as the most complete, “in which the play of all the chief muscle-groups of the body is harmoniously interwoven. When both sexes take part in such an exercise, developed into an idealized yet passionate pantomime of love, we have the complete erotic dance.” Desire fuels the quest for a disciplined body through which its urgent mssagings might be apprehended, he reasons. Although “potent and dazzling images, all wrought by desire” have proliferated among the cultures of the world, both the mechanism of bodily cultivation and its message remain the
same. Thus Ellis’s notion of dancing—protean, evolving—takes different forms but remains continuous with its primitive origins.

Ellis’s earlier studies of the sexual impulse had likewise explored dance’s role as a major form of arousal of the sexual instinct. He argued that sexual desire, that category of human experience that links animals and humankind, both primitive and civilized, is brought about by and cultivated through dance movement. In his *Analysis of the Sexual Impulse* Ellis presents an overwhelming array of ethnographic evidence in support of his theory that both civilized and savage peoples use dancing to arouse sexual excitement. After discussing the choreography of courtship practices among snails, octopi, spiders, praying mantises, cowbirds, tyrant flycatchers, “red-breasted marsh-birds,” mallards, pheasants, and ostriches, Ellis proceeds with pages of anecdotal reports drawn from anthropological and travelogue literatures on the relationship between dancing and sexual activity. He quotes descriptions of lascivious dances among the Muras of Brazil who hold “a Bacchantic dance in a great circle [that includes] a pantomimic representation of sexual intercourse”; the Wolofs who perform a dance in which “the woman tucks up her clothes and convulsively agitates the lower part of her body; she alternately shows her partner her vulva and hides it from him by a regular movement, backward and forward, of the body”; and the “Australians of Dieyrie” whose “women keep time by clapping their hands between their thighs; promiscuous sexual intercourse follows after the dance; jealousy is forbidden.”222 In the Torres Strait “the young men woo girls by being good dancers as a substitute for the old days in which whoever brought home the head of someone they had killed was considered the best catch.”223 Women dancers living on the island of Nias in the Malay Archipelago perform “a lascivious undulation of the flanks while the face and breast are slowly wound round by the *srong* held in the hands, and then again revealed,”224 whereas the Tahitians perform dances “consisting of motions and gestures beyond imagination wanton.”225 Those who organize ritual ceremonies that begin with dancing and end with sexual intercourse include the Alfars of Seram in the Moluccas, the Kafirs of southern Africa, the Guros of the Ivory Coast, and the Minitari (Hidatsa) of the Three Affiliated Tribes of North Dakota. Those cultures that feature dancing at marriage ceremonies both to enhance the desire of the newly married couple and to promote feelings of courtship among unmarried attendees include people living along the Wanigela River in Papua New Guinea and in Sumatra, according to Ellis. He even includes mention of Marquesan celebrations, in which, he alleges, all the men present are invited to engage in sexual intercourse with the bride.226

Ellis makes several observations about dance in relation to sexual practices based on this evidence: first, that dancing develops the musculature thoroughly and effectively; second, and as a consequence, dancing produces tumescence, that biological condition that marks an essential stage in the narrative of sexual fulfillment; and third, that because dancing leads inevitably to tumescence, all species place dance in the service of the sexual instinct.227 The link between dancing and sexual excitement may be attenuated but never severed. Indeed, the distinction between primitive and civilized societies can be established in the degree to which civilized groups prolong and abstract the fact of tumescence as evidenced in their dance practices, Ellis says. He goes further, claiming that savage societies engage in realistic pantomimes of sexual arousal and coitus, whereas civilized societies elaborate a more remote, symbolic version of sexual excitation, one that nonetheless serves in some cases as a complete substitute for sexual gratification.228 Paradoxically, then, civilized choreography, which places sex at a great distance from dance by removing the overt sexual references, can and does stand in for the actual sexual act. As proof of this, Ellis explains that young British girls find that once sexual relations have been established, their ardor for dancing dissipates.229

Underpinning Ellis’s vision of dance is the biological presupposition that as muscular movement increases, the higher centers of the nervous system no longer dominate. According to Ellis: “Muscular movement of which the dance is the highest and most complex expression, is undoubtedly a method of autointoxication of the very greatest potency. All energetic movement, indeed,
tends to produce active congestion. In its influence on the brain, violent exercise may thus result in a state of intoxication even resembling insanity.230 As the body engages in intense physical exercise, it produces a state of congestion that reduces one’s capacity to think and to control desire. Or perhaps the prolonged and repetitious use of the neuromuscular system simply diminishes brain activity. Whatever the case, dancing not only enhances heteroerotic desire but when practiced alone encourages an auroerotic ecstasy, according to Ellis, working on the nervous system simultaneously as a narcotic and a stimulant.31 Under conditions that fail to monitor dancing properly, such delirium may even approach insanity.

The act of dancing cultivates tumescence, creating either auroerotic or heterosexual fervor. But even watching the dance produces this same effect, he says.32 At its least, the spectacle of dance induces states of well-being and a sense of increased potency. If the numerous descriptions of savage dances cited by Ellis are any indication, viewing the dance may even arouse desire to participate in sexual acts. Whether as performer or viewer, participants in dance slide backward along the continua of biological, social, and evolutionary development toward more primitive states of being. Biological notions of higher and lower centers of bodily control reinforce even as they complement evolutionist theories of complex and simple species and of civilized and primitive peoples. By dancing, participants and viewers activate lower nerve systems, revert to more primal needs, and respond to base, instinctual impulses, according to Ellis. One of the travelogue accounts on which he relied summed dance up this way: “There is, perhaps, no exercise in greater accordance with the sentiments or feelings of a barbarous people, or more fully calculated to gratify their wild and ungoverned passions.”33 According to such accounts, dancing both inspires and cultivates base desires, uncontrollable desires. Dancing thus signals barbarism and all its attendant conditions—unruliness, self-absorption, hedonistic indulgence in the sensate, and uncontrollable violence.34

Little wonder, then, that choreographers such as Duncan and St. Denis marshaled their forces so carefully to refute all presumptions of equivalence between sex and dance. The mere fact of their bodily motion, female bodily motion, on stage summoned up the deviant, the savage, and the sexual.35 In order not to appear as fallen women—women who had degenerated from civilization into barbarism, from mind-controlled action into bodily determined frenzy, or from the human into the bestial—they crafted bodily movement that insistently referenced nonsexual dimensions of human experience. In order to justify their art, they effectively tapped the same racist and colonialist impulses that motivated the descriptions of dance-as-sex that Ellis relied on for his research. Unlike African dance, which simply enhanced as it displayed stages in the sexual act, Duncan’s dances embodied civilization—noble, refined, classical. Unlike the actual dances of Asia and the Pacific, whose ritual frenzy belied their sexual investment, St. Denis’s dances gestured toward a higher spiritual quest.

But in their resolute denial of the sexual, these choreographers also manifested the newly imagined subject, a subject capable of possessing a sexuality, which studies such as Ellis’s had begun to reveal. Rather than investigate taxonomies of sexual practices, Ellis and the other turn-of-the-century sexologists had pursued sexuality as an individually distinctive coalescence of identifiable patterns of desire, arousal, and fulfillment into a singular entity. Both sexuality and the subjectivity that surrounded it operated as bounded autonomous, and choreographers such as Duncan and St. Denis gave embodiment to precisely this vision of identity. Their onstage personas, no longer trapped within the familiar romances displayed by the ballet, enacted narratives of their own design that contoured the geography of the psyche. Even as they seemed transported into the ecstatic space of communion with musical and spiritual universals, their bodies responded defiantly, as admirable instruments of expression. Through their choreographic mapping of interiority, they gave embodiment to the kind of fulsome subjectivity within which something called a sexuality might dwell. The body served as emblem of this subjectivity, charting new territories of the natural and also as docile vehicle for conveying the subject’s exploration of identity. It mimicked the structural in-
tegrity of sexuality, and in the very same moment demonstrated that this sexuality could be controlled, even denied.

Thus even as sexuality was achieving new status as a powerful motivating force within the individual, Duncan and St. Denis demonstrated how such a sexuality could be contained. Unlike the dancing girls of ballet and cabaret, whose identities metonymically elided with sexual practices—flirtation, promiscuity, prostitution—both on stage and off, Duncan and St. Denis possessed a sexuality over which they exerted individualized control. Duncan, the mother of three illegitimate children, remained resolutely chaste in her dances; St. Denis, who flaunted her precarious control over bodily desires on stage, performed off stage as a devoted wife. Both artists exhibited to their public an alluring independence and a spiritual purpose that ensured they would not slide into deviant or uncivilized categories of behavior.

Through these founding gestures—individual creative exploration, the display of whiteness, and chastity—these women secured a new tradition of choreographic experimentation and a place for themselves within that tradition. This new tradition challenged the politics of danced spectacle by deflecting the objectifying force of the male gaze and ennobling the dancer on whose body all eyes rested. In this aesthetic and political labor, they joined hundreds of other Progressive-era initiatives to bring women and a female presence into the public sphere.35 Yet this labor did not challenge the conception of dance itself as feminine, nor alter significantly the prejudice against men dancing. Dancing’s decorous display of the body and its interest in emotional and spiritual life aligned it too strongly with the feminine ever to be considered man’s work, that is, until Ted Shawn, the director and choreographer for an all-male dance company, announced his campaign to prove that dance was a manly pursuit.

A HALE AND RUGGED LYRICISM

Ted Shawn first met Havelock Ellis in 1923, just after the publication of The Dance of Life.36 According to his biographer, Walter Terry, this crucial encounter helped Shawn come to terms with his homosexuality: “For the first time he was able to hear someone discuss sex easily and homosexuality without embarrassment. . . . It is likely that his readings of ancient Greek culture and the acceptance of male-for-male love were removed from myth and placed into reality for him by Ellis.”38 Shawn visited Ellis while on tour with his wife and collaborator, Ruth St. Denis. They had begun working together in 1914, fashioning programs of dances that extended St. Denis’s orientalizing approach to include duets and larger group pieces, as well as her renowned solos and supplementary solos for Shawn. With indefatigable dedication they proselytized for the new modern dance in thousands of performances across the United States, Asia, and Europe and in their Denishawn schools established in Los Angeles and New York. By the late 1920s, however, Shawn and St. Denis could no longer sustain their professional or personal relationships, and they separated permanently in 1931, leaving Shawn free to embark upon his lifelong dream of founding an all-male dance company.39

At the height of the depression Shawn retreated to a rundown farm in western Massachusetts that he named Jacob’s Pillow, and from there he recruited dancers he taught at Springfield College and others who had seen him dance with St. Denis. With no electricity, heat, or running water and little to eat, they set about creating a repertory of dances to be toured across the United States. In their spare time they repaired and improved upon facilities at the farm. The company, consisting of eight to ten dancers, lived commimually, rehearsed in the summers, and toured in the winter for eight seasons, from 1933 to 1940. At first using contacts with physical education programs in universities, and eventually playing at such prestigious venues as the Brooklyn Academy of Music and Carnegie Hall, they gave 1,250 performances in more than 750 cities, averaging forty-two thousand miles of travel each year (see chapter 4). While on tour they did the driving, set up the theater, performed, struck the show and packed the truck, met with interested people, and then drove on to the next town. In the first year alone they offered 111 performances, and Shawn personally talked to 150 audiences at luncheons, assemblies, and club meetings; I had given 100 newspaper interviews, and 50 radio broadcasts.”40
Shawn's message at these gatherings, zealously delivered and easily apprehended, affirmed that "yes, men can and should dance." The organization of his arguments belied the prejudice that his company aspired to redress: that dancing was a feminine and therefore unmanly pursuit and that those men who did make dancing their vocation were probably homosexuals. In support of dancing's manliness, Shawn, like Duncan, elaborated on images of the body in Whitman and in classical Greek dancing, but rather than emphasize the healthy and unfettered female body, he focused on the athletic and virile male body. He attributed the low esteem for dance as an art form to the absence of male participation, and, insisting on dance's importance, especially for an active nation like the United States, questioned whether such a significant pursuit should be left in the hands of women.

To this masculinist line of argumentation Shawn added a racist assessment of Negro dance, expounding a complex evolutionist theory that connected the Negro to the sexual:

The Negro brought with him all the primitive simplicity of the rhythm of the savage, the unsophistication in regard to his body and its natural functions. . . . Because Negroes are very simple in their emotional structure and in their mental and spiritual development, their attitude toward the physical body is one of great naïveté and the natural movements of the body are not sinful to them. And so their dances are innocently sensuous. When one sees a Negro do a dance of Negro origin, he can do all sorts of things, such as the movements in the "shimmy" and the "Charleston," and one likes it. It is his, and it belongs to him. But when one sees a white person do these dances, it is disgusting, because the Negro mental and emotional conditions cannot be translated into the white man.41

Because Negro peoples were less evolved, he argued, they exhibited none of the licentious sexual connotations that more sophisticated whites would evoke when performing Negro dances.42 This kind of argument made use of and relied upon the presumptions about dance's relation to sexuality that Ellis had included in his anthropological and travelogue evidence. Shawn thereby reinforced stereotypic images of race and dance but at the same time distanced his own choreography and company from such "savage impulses." In this way Shawn reaffirmed the anti-sexual stance of modern dance and defended his work against allegations of homosexuality.

The concerts that "Ted Shawn and His Male Dancers" presented embodied this vision of virile, nonsexual, physical accomplishment even as they made use of the exotic capacities of world dances. Building on St. Denis's and Shawn's earlier approach to repertory, the concerts delivered a pleasing array of visually contrasting short works whose distinctive costuming and movement vocabulary would be rationalized by a single theme. *Olympiad,* for example, presented dances based on movement themes from the shot put, hurdles, tennis, fencing, running, boxing, and basketball. *Labor Symphony* included renditions of labors of the field, forest, and sea, as well as mechanized labor. *Primitive Rhythms* presented dances based on themes from Ponca, Hopi, Sinhalese, Dayak, and Maori dances. *Religious Dances* offered a whirling dervish in full regalia, monks, a portrait of St. Francis, and several dances performed to Negro spirituals.43 *Dance of the Ages* grouped studies of different movement qualities into four sections, each associated with a different element—fire, water, earth, and air—and a different level of social and political organization—tribe, city-state, democracy, and beyond democracy.44 And *Kinetic Malpai,* with its zealously performed variations of effort and rhythm and its interlocking patterns, celebrated modernism itself. A typical evening's program would combine exotic and athletic dances to ensure visual diversity while reinforcing the strenuous physical achievement.

Where the dances representing foreign lands exhibited the unusual in costuming and movement, dances based on familiar activities such as sports or work rendered those activities strangely exciting. Viewers were presented with the challenging and engaging request to decipher the activity being depicted, whether it be fencing or sawing down a tree. Typically, the most pantomime-like, and hence most recognizable, versions of activities occurred near the beginning of the section. Having identified the referent, viewers could then track the elaboration of these actions
into more abstract movement phrases. By treating movement itself as material capable of being varied and transformed, Shawn, like Duncan and St. Denis before him, directed attention away from the dancing body as a preconceived source of sexual impulses and toward the spatial and temporal properties of the movement. At the same time the selection of masculine topics and the vigorous rendering of those topics imbued the body with an almost hypermasculinity.

Embodying Shawn's distinctively masculine movement style and set of procedures for moving bodies through space, dancers traveled rapidly across the stage using small rhythmic step patterns while maintaining a stiff torso, arms held rigidly in place. In many pieces dancers clenched their fists throughout in order to enhance the musculature of the upper body and to evoke images of brute strength. Never undulating or contracting but sometimes twisting in the manner of classical Greek sculpture, dancers locomoted and then posed, turned and then jumped, ran to a new place and posed again. Each pose was stated emphatically, energy surging through the dancers' limbs until they achieved the desired shape, limbs arresting abruptly yet swelled with tension as they maintained their position. The dancers' shaved armpits and chests further enhanced their resemblance to classical Greek beings in repose and in motion.

Again and again, dancers separated into two groups of four, formed columns, and crossed the stage toward each other in unison or quick succession, indicating a kind of aggressive or competitive engagement. This back-and-forth dialogue would dissolve into circular configurations, dancers running, leaping, or falling to the floor while delineating a large circle at center stage. Shawn used diagonals only occasionally, preferring a frontal display of the body moving from upstage to downstage or across stage. Almost all movement phrases were repeated two or four times to alternating sides of the body. Relentless, repetitive, symmetrical, the bodies sustained a vigorous display of motion and shape, usually culminating in massive numbers of jumps. Yet as routinized as the sequences often appeared, the bodies maintained a distinctive physicality and individuality. They never achieved a perfect unison, nor did they exhibit the classical grace imparted in ballet training. Not bodies attempting to approximate a perfect shape, they displayed themselves as bodies that had developed their inherent strength and agility.

Throughout, dancers consistently retained a three- to five-foot distance from one another. Individual bodies seldom performed contrasting actions, and they never moved closer to or farther away from one another than the prescribed distance between all bodies. Dancers never touched; they never assisted one another, leaned into one another, or moved through space arm in arm. Only when dancers were assembled together to create a single design configuration did their bodies make contact, their weight merge. These designs involved the entire group, seldom four dancers and never two alone. Usually symmetrical, bodies were arranged on either side of a central figure, Shawn. Alternatively, bodies connected to suggest a single line, carried sequentially along from one to the next to create a dynamic upward gesture.

Shawn himself circulated around and through these younger bodies, exhorting, fostering, summoning their energies, commanding, or directing them. He alerted them to the drama,comforted them when they were down, revealed the future to them when kneeling, inspired them to rise and move, called them on stage, and designated their pathways through space. He appeared fatherlike, understanding, but also visionary and pioneering. In contrast, his solos elaborated a more lyrical, slow-moving, and softer style. Often in 3/4 time, he mused, deliberated, and searched, portraying a kind of interior life that the other dancers never showed. Sometimes he incorporated poses and phrases from pantomime, as graphic and stilted as those of the silent films. Crushed, desolate, without hope, he would sink to the floor, only to rise, inspired by or appealing to a higher good. Terror transformed into courage and despair into resolution. But these elegiac dramatizations of interiority were soon displaced by the return of the company, whose exhibition of dance as expressive work dissipated any lingering images of the soul-searching individual.

The overall effect of the evening's dances, with their rugged exuberance, their direct symmetrical frontal engagement with mov-
ment, convinced audiences immediately of men's vital place in the world of dance. Shawn's choreography used the abstract potential of dance movement to construct a democratic vision of individual creativity and individually developed bodies in which masculinity held a privileged place. As one critic enthusiastically explained, the concerts presented

vigor limned by restraint; furious motion controlled and balanced and suggestive of mighty harmonies; muscular ordeliness and pointed grace; a tale and rugged lyricism whose line is gentle; but never effeminate or Hogarthian; energy; humility and bravura, suavity and simplicity; power; beauty. Which of these qualities apparent in Shawn's work can be called effeminate?26

The dances exalted the male body's noble restraint, grandeur, and potency, proclaiming loudly that nothing effeminate, much less homosexual, could survive in this robust environment. This message was so powerful that even the other dancers in the group referred to lead dancer Barton Mumaw, Shawn's lover for many years, as "the best dancer in the group" or as "the only dancer with prior training and dance experience."47

By presenting an all-male dance company, Shawn directly confronted audience prejudices against dance and homosexuality. By showing the noble male body engaged in vital virile expressive work, he begged entirely the question of the dancers' sexual orientation. In stark contrast to the contorted repression of sexuality evident in Nijinsky's vocabulary, Shawn's dances cultivated an open direct Greek ideal. Based on his readings of Ellis, Edward Carpenter, and John Addington Symonds, Shawn's conception of the Greek included homosexual forms of love and filiation.48 At his company performed across the United States, however, its classical cultivation of the body probably referenced high art, noble ideals, and nothing more. And unlike Nijinsky's elite aesthetic accomplishments, Shawn's able-bodied youths compounded their high ideals with a populist enthusiasm that invited everyone to celebrate dance.

In his study of homosexuality, Sexual Inversion, Ellis allies the homosexual with the artistic genius. Both, he argues, exhibited the same nervous predisposition, and a remarkable number of homosexuals that Ellis interviewed possessed artistic aptitude in varying degrees.49 Where Nijinsky danced forth just this vision of the connection between sexual deviance and artistic brilliance, Shawn sought to mask the possibility of homosexual preferences and to refute any association between sexuality and creativity. Shawn's dances choreographed a setting of the kind of homosexual desire Ellis describes.

For Ellis, homosexuality, or, as he calls it, inversion, results from an aberrant alteration in the individual's "recessive sex."50 Events in childhood, puberty, or even adulthood that shape the sexual impulse could further influence this congenital predisposition toward inversion. Ellis found enormous variations in inversion and devoted much of his study to delineating different proclivities, preferences, and characteristics within the invert population. In contrast to Freudian-based studies that proposed a purely psychological and social basis for homosexuality, Ellis attributes a congenital cause to a significant percentage of the cases he had observed:

Putting the matter in a purely speculative shape, it may be said that at conception the organism is provided with about 50 per cent. of male germs and about 50 per cent. of female germs, and that as development proceeds, either the male or the female germs assume the upper hand, until in the maturely developed individual only a few aborted germs of the opposite sex are left. In the homosexual, however, and in the bisexual, we may imagine that the process has not proceeded normally, on account of some peculiarity in the number or character of either the original male germs or female germs, or both, the result being that we have a person who is organically twisted into a shape that is more fitted for the exercise of the inverted than of the normal sexual impulse.51

Because of this "twisted shape" in the "recessive" sexual "germs" of the invert, homosexual men exhibited a general tendency to adopt feminine traits and habits, and homosexual women were more likely to take on masculine qualities. This twist, in the strictest sense of the term a degeneration or falling away from the higher developmental goal of the organism, should not, in
Ellis's liberal opinion, be viewed pejoratively but rather as a kind of “sport” or variation like color-blindness that affects all organisms.²²

Shawn's dances depicted the kind of autonomous beings Ellis describes—their character developed from innate predispositions in interaction with social influences. His choreography championed the individual, creating a tense and dynamic relationship between each body and the larger group. Yet Shawn's dances exhibited no trace of the degenerate, no hint of the feminine. Inverting the invert, the dancers never looked soft or flexible; they never curved. They never even touched except in those rare moments when the choreography stipulated that all bodies contribute to a common design. Like Duncan and St. Denis before him, Shawn sequestered sexuality so effectively that no one in the audience could even speculate about whether the dancers, like the “savages” that Ellis discusses, might embark on other kinds of bodily explorations after their concert. Shawn's hypermasculine choreography, built with the same premises Ellis stipulates in his definition of homosexuality, cloistered him effectively, if not completely.

Silenced as they were by the chastity of the dancing, some audience members saw straight past Shawn's manly ideal to the possibility of male homosexual love celebrated and honored in the noble forms of the dance. In his autobiography Mumaw reminisces about the many occasions when young men, discovering their homosexual preferences, found inspiration in the company of men dancers:

We were constantly made aware of a more subtle response to our work by young men, students mostly, each of whom confided that his Old Man preferred him to run the risks of injuries in a football game rather than accept the challenge of an art that was equally strenuous, vowing that “I'll see you dead before I'll let you be a dancer!” Many of these frustrated boys were proficient in different fields of athletics. Some dared knock on stage doors, or come back to the locker rooms of college gyms to talk to us about dancing. Others approached us on campus or on small-town streets, pathetically pretending a fascination with our streamlined DeSoto in an attempt to disguise their real interest. Only a few were furtive.

The rare spats I had with Ted during periods on the road were triggered by my meeting someone who became infatuated with me.²³

Yet these repeated incidental encounters exerted no influence on the general reception of the work or on Shawn's sense of aesthetic purpose. The message he hoped to disseminate concerned the respectability and vitality of men dancing, not the need for a new understanding of homosexual love. And his approach proved enormously successful. Shawn's immense labor, touring and introducing viewers across the United States to modern dance, was met with understanding and great enthusiasm. Only the catalysis of World War II could arrest his initiative to exalt an American form of dance and a male dancing body.

SIMPLY AN ACTIVITY OF MOVEMENT

Whatever the gains in respectability for the male dancer following Shawn's eight-year campaign, the conservative reassertion of traditional gender roles following World War II resuscitated many prejudices against him. Still, in the relatively protected ecology of modern dance in New York City and with Martha Graham's formidable reputation as legitimation and her harsh, nonlyrical movement vocabulary as a resource, Merce Cunningham emerged as a promising young male artist when he left her company in 1947 to pursue his own career as a choreographer. The postwar modern dance, a field dominated by women artists, also focused on the gynocentrically marked concerns of feeling and psychological intensity. Choreography, an introspective process, helped to reveal and communicate innermost motivations, impulses, and desires. As the only male choreographer to appear in many group concerts or in a given season of programming, Cunningham would have been subject to scrutiny regarding his masculinity and his sexuality: What made him choose dance? What might his dances reveal about the inner depths of his psyche?

Although suspicions regarding his sexual orientation undoubtedly circulated among dancers and viewers, confirmed for those who knew him by his ardent relationship with John Cage, Cunningham determinedly embarked on his choreographic ca-
reer, supported by the general climate of experimentation. His early repertory evidenced several distinct lines of investigation: haunting, psychologically probing solos; humorous, light-hearted, or absurdist group works; and explorations of bodies in space and time. His solos conveyed the substance of interiority by using a contorted dissonant vocabulary that pushed at the limits of acceptable dance movement, as this description of Untitled Solo (1953) by Clive Barnes suggests: “With Untitled Solo, the mood changed to neurotic despair. Swift and sinuous, this solo proved pungently unpleasant—it was perhaps the nearest Cunningham got all season to choreography that was visually assaulting and unpleasant in precisely the same way that the musicians, on quite frequent occasions, made ugly and offensive noises.” Similarly, Changeling (1957), a “strange and ugly solo,” yet acclaimed for its “technical brilliance” and “imaginative punch,” seemed “to suggest a man climbing through a never ending tunnel.” In these pieces Cunningham cultivated the expressivity of bodily tension, the contrasting and dynamic oppositions that parts of that the body were capable of, that Graham had used so effectively in her work. Yet, unlike Graham, he seems to have interpolated pedestrian motifs and quixotic gestures that effaced the monumental claims to an archetypal significance made by her dances. As the music critic Peter Yates observes, “I had seen Merce Cunningham’s work, a couple of times, as late as 1955, appreciating the individuality of his approach, his manner—clown, Pierrot, fantasist—still anchored to the diagonal axes and the expressive exaggeration of gesture which had made him for several years a leading dancer of the Graham company, though already freed, as I now realize in retrospect, of the mythic, monumental formality.”

Alongside his charismatic solos, Cunningham contrived humorous group works such as Banjo (1955), which he described as “an accelerated and heightened montage of familiar southern American motifs,” and Antic Meet (1958), a dance that collaged absurd and preposterous situations involving multiple props, costumes, and well-known physical gags. According to Barnes’s review of Antic Meet from performances given in London in 1964:

Antic Meet is a projection into wispy infinity of the two archetypal American jokes. . . . Two men fight—one is killed—the other solicitously returns to drag him off . . . wearing a fur coat. A man with a flourish lays a table for dinner . . . another unconcernedly carries it off unused. A man struggles desperately with a sweater . . . the sweater has four arms but no hole for the head. One girl is pelting another with itsy-bitsy pebbles; the victim gets tired and throws a bucket of water over her assailant.

The crazy logic of a door sliding on by itself, a man opening it and out stepping a girl, or of their subsequent pas de deux, with a boy having a chair strapped to his back so that she sits down while being partnered.

Carolyn Brown, principal dancer with Cunningham’s company for almost thirty years, was the “girl” who stepped through the door wearing an antique bridal gown. Cunningham partnered her in an extended duet wearing the chair. At another point in the piece all the dancers suddenly put on sunglasses. These irreverent choreographic choices, with their humor and lavish theatricality, challenged the sacred boundaries between dance movement, pedestrian behavior, and comic gag and inverted the expressive mandate embodied in his solos.

In his third approach to dance making, Cunningham drew upon ballet as well as modern dance vocabularies, as well as his thorough knowledge of musical composition, to elaborate on bodies’ positionalities in space and through time. Dances such as Septet (1953), Suite for Five (1953–1958), and Summerspace (1958) displayed intricate step patterns, complex rhythms and changes of weight, and a radical treatment of dancers’ dispositions in space. If drawn on paper as a record of the entire dance, paths for bodies traveling through space would form a complicated web of overlapping, crisscrossing trajectories. These dances contained no symmetry and only rare unison. Often the bodies remained erect with the spine occasionally curving forward, side, or back in conjunction with specific shapings of the arms and legs. Movement impulses never traveled sequentially from one region of the body to the next, nor did movements build toward climactic moments in a phrase. Throughout, the dances sustained an
evenness of phrasing and phrase, with leaps or other grand gestures taking on no larger significance than the steps that preceded them.

Many of these dances applied Cage's theories of chance procedures as generative of new musical possibilities to the creation of dance movement and the organization of the dance. Summertime, for example, used chance procedures to determine locations of entrances and exits, pathways through space, and the sequences of movement, ranging from simple to complex, associated with those pathways. Cunningham also used chance to designate lengths of phrases, number of dancers, and the simultaneity of dancers' performances. He taught each of the five dancers their parts separately and then rehearsed them together. Alternatively, he would invoke chance procedures just before the performance, as in Rime (1959) or Diene a Dance (1953), asking all members of the company to appear on stage ready to dance seven of the thirteen sections of the piece. Yet, "which seven these are is not known by any of them beforehand, but is determined by chance means," the program informed the audience.

In contrast to his brooding solos or zany theatrics, these dances focused especially on the spatial and temporal characteristics of bodies in motion. This focus eventually prevailed as the epistemological grounding for his entire choreographic vision. Rather than characters and stories, his dances would present bodies in motion. Meaning would be located not in the psychological implications of bodily gesture but in the physical characteristics of movement itself. During the late 1950s and early 1960s Cunningham formulated program notes that conveyed this aesthetic stance to a bewildered and sometimes resistant audience: "Mr. Cunningham has said of his choreography that there are not symbols, no stories, no psychological problems. What you see is what is. Each spectator must determine the meaning of the dance for himself." And Cage provided this explanation, which the company used repeatedly in its programs and publicity:

We are not, in these dances and music, saying something. We are sempliminded enough to think that if we were saying something we would use words. We are rather doing something. The meaning of what we do is determined by each one who sees and hears it... I may add there are no stories and no psychological problems. There is simply an activity of movement, sound and light. The costumes are all simple in order that you may see the movement.

The movement is the movement of the body. It is here that Mr. Cunningham focuses his choreographic attention, not on the facial muscles. In daily life people customarily observe faces and hand gestures, translating what they see into psychological terms. Here, however, we are in the presence of a dance which utilizes the entire body, requiring for its enjoyment the use of your faculty of kinesic sympathy. It is this faculty we employ when, seeing the flight of birds, we ourselves, by identification, fly up, glide, and soar.

The lift of a leg or a leap might incite momentary exuberance; a gliding trajectory through space, a sense of calm. But these were fleeting associations between motion and emotion that each audience member could experience individually. Where the modern dance of Graham or Doris Humphreys had cultivated the connection between movement and interior psychological states of being in order to move audiences into and through a sustained psychological narrative, Cunningham eschewed the rigors of narrative continuity in favor of a disciplined attentiveness to each moment's motion.

This approach to choreography constructed a radical new identity for the viewer. Rather than encourage all viewers to connect to the universal meaning of the dance, Cunningham's work emphasized the viewer's role as independent agent. The dance offered a field of possibilities into which each viewer entered. Once there they could experience the dance, each in her or his own way. Because the dance rebuffed all efforts to find narrative continuity, it created neither storytellers nor listeners. Adamantly, it said nothing but did something. And its activity and agency were located within the physical possibilities for bodily motion.

Shawn, in his variations on well-known activities, had emphasized the capacity of movement to build upon itself, to generate meaning through reference to its spatial, temporal, and tensile characteristics. Yet his dances always evinced a message—about
the glory of work, the power of ritual, or the nobility of world dances—which his dancers as expressive agents conveyed. Cunningham, in contrast, construed his dances as a window onto the indeterminate liveliness of life experience. His dancers, not the zealous messengers of a vital masculine expressivity, attended with concentrated purposefulness to the movement directives that constituted the choreography. In this focus on movement and on the individual response to and interpretation of that movement, Cunningham found protection for his homosexual identity. Shawn’s protective closet had disguised the individual sexual orientations of his dancers within the hypermasculinity of their performance personas. Cunningham’s closet, in contrast, fractured bodies into parts of equal significance and value so that individuality could only be defined by the activities, all of equal value, in which the dancer was at each moment engaged. Where Shawn had exaggerated his dancers’ masculine capabilities, Cunningham neutralized all masculine, feminine, and sexual connotations by focusing on space, time, and motion.65

Consider, for example, this glimpse into Cunningham’s working process, documented by a German film crew in 1967: A white woman (Sandra Neels) and a black man (Gus Solomons) lie on the floor in close embrace. She lifts her right leg up, circling it around his body and causing them both to roll so that she lies directly on top of him. Her weight does not settle onto his, however, because she continues the leg’s gesture by standing on it, rising into a lunge, and finally pushing off the leg to turn and walk away. Approximately six seconds of choreography, Cunningham rehearses it for several minutes. He experiments with different placements of an arm or leg and with the precise calibration of bodies as they roll from side by side to top and underneath. He slows the movement; he lies beside the couple, going through their motions, demonstrating, inquiring, where arms and legs should be placed. Throughout, no one jokes or giggles. Their intimate coupling is treated as one of the infinite number of positions that bodies can inhabit. Cunningham maintains a businesslike and efficient attitude, soliciting through his quiet dedication an absolute and unwavering attention from the dancers.66

Later in the film Neels is asked about the meaning of her brief duet with Solomons. She speculates that if she were to question Cunningham about its significance, he would simply eliminate the phrase from the dance not, she seems to suggest, because the question might have drawn to his attention an undesirable referent or effect of the phrase but because the mandate to accept all motions as equivalent had been compromised by her interrogation of this specific phrase. Cunningham’s determination to cultivate the body as a neutral field of possibilities prohibited narrative continuity and denied the standard cultural codes for gendered and sexual identities. His approach presumed an absolute equivalence of male and female bodies, and black and white bodies.67 Living in the kind of world constructed by his dances, homosexual conduct or African American identity would carry valences no different from those of white heterosexual behavior. Both homosexual and heterosexual object choices, black and white aesthetic choices, would hypothetically take place within the same open field of possibilities. Difference, his dances proclaimed, could only be located in the distinctive physical capacities of each individual body’s joint flexibility, bone lengths, muscular mass, speed, or dexterity.

Through this determined inquiry into physicality, Cunningham perpetuated the tradition of a nonsexual dancing instigated by the earliest modern choreographers. He also sustained its inherent racism. Solomons, the first black and one of the few non-white dancers ever to work with Cunningham, points up the whiteness of Cunningham’s approach. The very project of locating identity in a physicality that denied racial difference could only be supported by a tradition that presumed its own universality.68 The window onto life’s indeterminate experience that Cunningham’s dances provided did not frame the racial or sexual prejudices operating in that life. Where Cunningham’s maleness was destabilized by the profession of dancing, his whiteness remained an unmarked and unchallenged category. His particular version of chasteness thereby deflected any inquiries into his sexual orientation and provided a safe haven for his homosexuality, but it denied the racial inequalities embodied in modern dance
and its cultural surround. Focusing on the problematic of race in Cunningham’s work thus brings into sharp relief the precise structure of the closet he crafted.

Cunningham’s emphasis on behavior rather than interior motivation, and his insistence on the individuality of that behavior, shared much with the research orientation of the leading sexologist of the period, Alfred Charles Kinsey. Just months after Cunningham left Graham’s company, Kinsey published his Sexual Behavior in the Adult Male. Its extraordinary notoriety and numerous reprintings provided the focus for discussions of homosexuality throughout the entire period that Cunningham was building his career. Kinsey pioneered in mass survey methods, and his study of sexuality involved more than twelve thousand men who were asked hundreds of questions about their sexual preferences and practices. Undoubtedly, the most startling finding of the entire report was that 37 percent of the male population had experienced some kind of homosexual encounter culminating in orgasm. Given the severe social condemnation of homosexuality, he further speculated that a much larger proportion of the population might engage in homosexual relations were they condoned.

The discovery of such a large proportion of homosexual activity caused Kinsey to reformulate the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual. Instead of the inversion model proposed by Ellis and others, he created a seven-point scale along which each individual’s behavior might be located. Such a scale shifted scientific inquiry away from the determination of innate and essential features of homosexuality and toward individual behavior:

It would encourage clearer thinking on these matters if persons were not characterized as heterosexual or homosexual, but as individuals who have had certain amounts of heterosexual experience and certain amounts of homosexual experience. Instead of using these terms as substantives which stand for persons, or even as adjectives to describe persons, they may better be used to describe the nature of the overt sexual relations, or of the stimuli to which an individual erotically responds.

Kinsey’s findings obliterated the notion of a clear-cut homosexual type or distinct homosexual body, demonstrating instead an extraordinary range of human sexual practice. Like Cunningham’s choreography, they focused on overt action rather than interior identity, and like his aesthetic vision of dance, they construed sexuality as an open field of possibilities.

The extreme debate provoked by Kinsey’s studies heightened acceptance but also increased fear and condemnation of homosexuality. In the generally liberal but never reliable arts milieu that they inhabited, Cunningham and Cage could share a bedroom but referred publicly to themselves as “collaborators who shared the same aesthetic principles.” Both artists cultivated a conduct that combined precision of action with an openness to interpretive possibilities. Cunningham, in particular, always spoke with great clarity about his goals and objectives but was entirely unwilling to predict what others might think or do. This stance, projected into his choreographic approach, shielded and disguised his homosexuality but also gave it a home.

As much as Cunningham advocated his open field of possibilities, denying the sexual and gendered referents of the dancing body, his dances articulated gender difference, and gestured toward Cunningham’s masculine and even homosexual identity. Male and female dancers performed overlapping yet distinctive vocabularies of movement in which men partnered and lifted women. The uprightness and clarity of purpose, the erect and nonorganic movement style, allied his dances with the more masculine ballet tradition than with the feminine modern dance. Even Cunningham’s emphasis on the practical material elements of dance composition imbued his approach with a masculine rationality that distinguished it from the chaotic excavations of interiority that his female colleagues conducted.

Within this masculine environment Cunningham circulated as the odd man out. In the early concerts of his works he, like Shaw, offered the only solos that addressed emotional themes. In group works he often remained alone or dancing off to the side, assigning himself the most unusual, preposterous, or quirky tasks. In Variations V (1966) he strips a large potted plastic plant
of all its leaves, later rides a bicycle, and still later exercises on a blanket, doing sit-ups and a headstand, while three male–female couples perform nearby. Where Shawn constructed a fatherly authority, leading his dancers forward or brooding in their absence, Cunningham fashioned himself as maverick, incidentally isolated and then nonclimactically reintegrated into the group’s activities. Like the boys who saw through Shawn’s closet, any who would look for it could find Cunningham’s difference. But the dancer’s and dance’s insistence that movement meant movement, their neutral and absorbed execution of each task at hand, effectively obscured his distinctiveness. This strategy, a personal and aesthetic negotiation of white matriarchal modern dance on the one hand and vicious homosexual prejudice on the other, would sustain his work for the next forty years. In one of their last residencies before Cage’s death, for example, a gay activist at the University of California, Berkeley, pressed Cunningham and Cage hard to come out of the closet and talk openly about their relationship. Cage responded characteristically by saying, “It’s quite simple, really. He does the shopping and I do the cooking.”

COMING INTO CONTACT

In 1972 Steve Paxton, a former member of Cunningham’s company and a participant in Judson Church experimental concerts in the early 1960s, instigated inquiry into a new approach to improvised partnering. Known as contact improvisation, the form asks dancers to create and focus on a moving point of physical contact between two or more bodies. Privileging momentum and flow over bodily shape, dancers merge their weight, sliding, rolling across and over one another, treating all points on the surface of the body as sequentially connected and as potential next directions along which their point of contact might travel. Dancers are asked to attend to the internal sensations of weight and flow generated by this contact, “letting the dance happen.” By maintaining awareness of this contact, rather than of the body’s appearance or the dance’s organization and coherence, they are able to develop the mutual trust, support, and quick-wittedness necessary to dive into each instant’s action and move wherever it takes them.

The practice of contact improvisation became increasingly popular throughout the mid- and late 1970s, spawning local groups and national networks that organized various occasions for learning and presenting the form. Dancers convened at weekly “jams” or larger festivals and workshops to practice contact, learning techniques for falling into or supporting another’s body, enhancing their ability to attend to each moment’s action. At these jams, dancers of all degrees of experience generally worked together, encountering one another’s weight, experimenting with qualities of touch, moving, then watching, and then moving again during a period of several hours. Performances, hardly distinguishable in structure or content from the jam sessions, showed the work in progress. A typical performance, shunning all the formality of a theater’s framing, would implement the same round-robin format used in workshops: two dancers would begin, joined by a third or fracturing into solos before reconstituting as new duets, and continuing until all dancers had taken their turn. Throughout, dancers cultivated the appearance of the pedestrian, smiling, scraping, rearranging their sweat pants in a thoroughly conscious yet casual way while audience members seated on the floor surrounded the dancers.

Deftly situated between art, sport, and sociality, contact improvisation functioned throughout the 1970s as both aesthetic and social initiative. As dance, it contested the boundaries between pedestrian and art movement vocabularies more thoroughly than Cunningham or the Judson experiments, claiming that its cultivation of agility and spontaneity could make of life a dance. It promoted egalitarian access to and interaction within the form, constructing many opportunities for success while avoiding hierarchies of evaluation. And it offered an intriguing new experience of subjectivity wherein dancers became defined by the contact between them. Rather than two separate entities coming together, they merged with the momentum generated by both bodies, a momentum that took on a life of its own. Cunningham had asked dancers to immerse themselves in the physical activity of dancing rather than in the psychological or spiritual associations that movement might generate. Contact improvisa-