construction of female and male body images in dance? How has the female and male body image of modern dance, or ballet, changed over the past hundred years, and what do those changes tell us about shifts in culture? What are the differences between dance forms that depend on the mirror in the training process and those that do not? What were the feminist implications of Yvonne Rainer’s “dances of denial”? How does the social hierarchy of the dance world embody sexist attitudes? Does Pina Bausch’s Tanztheater effectively condemn or glorify gender warfare?

The value of feminist analysis to dance studies, however, is not just for feminists. It promises to contribute to the development of the field at large, in at least four ways. First, the emphasis on the process of representation is leading to new insights into the ways that dance produces meaning. Second, research about dance figures overlooked by the canon (the list of dances, choreographers, and dancers that our field generally agrees are the most important) is enriching and expanding our understanding of dance history. Third, the introduction of theories and ideas from other disciplines is a potential stimulant to dance scholars of all persuasions. And fourth, the broadened view of dance as a cultural practice, rather than as a purely aesthetic phenomenon, will lead dance into a more prominent place in the social sciences. In this sense, feminist analysis is part of a larger trend in our discipline toward an expanded concept of dance studies as a field of significant social, political, and cultural relevance.¹¹


Dance History and Feminist Theory
Reconsidering Isadora Duncan and the Male Gaze

Isadora Duncan (1877–1927) is unarguably one of the seminal figures in twentieth-century American dance.¹ Her importance lay neither in the extension of an existing form, as did George Balanchine’s, nor in her progeny, as did Ruth St. Denis’s, but rather in the fact that she created an entirely new form of dance. Duncan’s choreography offered her spectators a new kind of meaning and demanded from them a new way of seeing. She ennobled the previously suspect image of the human body and succeeded in her bid to legitimize dance as high art. As an international celebrity who lived out her beliefs in the corsetless figure and in voluntary motherhood, Duncan is commonly held to be an exemplary feminist, although she never explicitly labeled herself as such.²

Duncan has been set forth as a symbol of the feminist impulse since Floyd Dell’s Women as World Builders: Studies in Modern Feminism. Published in 1913, this book was the first of many written by Dell, a radical intellectual and assistant editor of the Masses, the quintessential Greenwich Village magazine. He astutely realized that the woman’s movement was in large part a product of nineteenth-century evolutionary theory, “which, by giving us a new view of the body, its functions, its needs, its claim upon the world, has laid the basis for a successful feminist movement.”³ In his chapter devoted to Duncan and writer/crusader Olive Schreiner, he wrote that Duncan expressed “the goodness of the whole body.”⁴ This new view of the body, he believed, was “as much a part of the woman’s movement as the demand for a vote (or, rather, it is more central and essential a part); and only by realizing this is it possible to understand that movement.”⁵ Since Dell, scholarly and popular critics alike—many less perspicacious than he—have painted Duncan as the larger-than-life symbol (sometimes the caricature) of Woman, who is casting off her corset, taking on lovers as she chooses, bearing children out of wedlock, and generally flouting the last-gasp strictures of oppressive Victorian culture.

Duncan did, of course, invite her status as a feminist spokesperson. She began to articulate a specifically female dancer very early in her career in her famous “The Dance of the Future” manifesto, delivered in 1903 to the Berlin Press Club. (It was here that she first encountered—and embraced—the extraordinary power of the reported word as a rhetorical adjunct to her dancing.) The following passage is one of the most often quoted in dance:

[The dancer of the future] will dance not in the form of nymph, nor fairy, nor coquette but in the form of woman in its greatest and purest expression. She will realize the mission of woman’s body and holiness of all its parts. She will dance the changing life of nature, showing how each part is transformed into the other. From all parts of her body shall shine radiant intelligence, bringing to the world the message of the thoughts and aspirations of thousands of women. She shall dance the freedom of woman. O, what a field is here awaiting her! Do you not feel that she is near, that she is coming, this dancer of the future? She will help womankind to a new knowledge of the possible strength and beauty of their bodies and the relation of their bodies to the earth nature and to the children of the future.

... O, she is coming, the dancer of the future: the free spirit, who will inhabit the body of new women; more glorious than any woman that has yet been; more beautiful than the Egyptian, than the Greek, the early Italian, than all woman in past centuries: The highest intelligence in the freest body!⁶

Those words have become a large part of the Duncan mythology, which has grown as unwieldy as the woman herself. For a number of reasons—the lack of a
film record of her dancing, the lack of a codified technique, the anecdotal nature of much dance history, the colorful drama of Duncan's personal life, and her own Irish flair for the well-spun tale—Duncan's career as a choreographer/dancer has been distorted in the American imagination. For one thing, there is no single "Isadora" to be embraced. Her dancing and her rhetoric changed over time, as did the meaning they held for her spectators. The popular image of Duncan as a liberated woman and an advocate of free love (embedded in the popular imagination by Vanessa Redgrave in the film The Loves of Isadora) may be more a product of our own social and political desires than a reasonable historical interpretation of her significance for American audiences during her own day.

Up until the last decade or so, dance history, which is a young discipline, consisted largely of the accretion of personal anecdotes, memories, impressions, and interpretations. The Duncan history is no exception; developing out of recycled interpretations rather than primary sources, it has followed two broad veins: the first, a romantic celebration of her liberated ways (usually by women); and the second, a classical dismissal of her antitechnical "dilettantism" (usually by men). Both interpretations oversimplify her artistry and concentrate on her personality.

In large part, the Duncan history began with the posthumous publication of her autobiography, My Life, a few months after her tragic, well-publicized death in September 1927. The autobiography, the first of two projected parts, is clearly written from the perspective of a middle-aged woman who realized that her era had passed. "My Art was the flower of an Epoch," she had written to Irma Duncan in 1924, "but that Epoch is dead and Europe is the past." She made it no secret that she was writing the memoirs for the money. A strictly commercial venture, the book necessarily stressed the personal rather than the professional and was indeed successful in terms of its international sales and newspaper serialization.

My Life clearly belongs more on the side of fiction than history. It tells us much more about Duncan's psychic state in 1926–1927 than it does about the course of her lifetime. But it made a legend out of her love life, thus setting the tone for much of the Duncan history. Most of what has been written about Duncan since her death focuses on her sexuality, as it was "revealed" through the book. Yet Duncan's love life was not reported in the American newspapers during her lifetime until her very last tour, in 1922–1923, when she was accompanied by her properly wedded young Russian poet lover, Sergei Eessenin. Duncan's own sexuality did not provide the primary framework for understanding her dances, yet it has taken interpretive precedence in much of the Duncan history.

In the hands of ballerinas, My Life has become the basis for a critique of Duncan's dancing. "The Sexual Idiom," Rayner Heppenstall's notorious essay on Duncan still circulating today in a dance anthology text, serves as prototype. A British essayist and ballerina, Heppenstall boldly reduces Duncan to an erotic, bare-legged spectacle:

Isadora's Art was, in effect, then, merely an art of sexual display, and I would stress the "merely." Isadora was not conscious of the fact. Nor, I suppose, were most of the spectators. She and they thought they were enjoying a spiritual experience. Perhaps they were, but it was only in the mass stimulation of private phantasies. There was no communication, or no communication in terms exact enough to be terms of art... Her art was aphrodisiac.

Heppenstall criticizes her for a lack of theatrical clarity and legibility. She stands for "Phantasy," while he values "Tradition." She does not mediate her body (her self) through the self-sacrificing, external objectification of a traditional form, that is, balletic technique. In Heppenstall's explicitly Freudian terms, she did not adequately "sublimate" her sexual impulses, which would have transformed them into art. The British ballerina blithely accepted the myth that Duncan was improvising and that her dances were a spontaneous outpouring of inner emotion. In fact, they were choreographed; they were rooted in a technique; and, they had form, although in different form than ballet's.

In a sense, this reaction is part of a willful denial of Duncan as choreographer, as creator—in a traditionally male domain. Instead, she is defined (even by sympathetic writers) as a dancer, emphasizing only the immanence of her body—a traditionally female domain. From here, it is a short leap to the conclusion that Duncan was merely acting out an erotic fantasy: "Isadora Duncan was not concerned to dance, not concerned with any clarity of plastic forms," concluded Heppenstall. "She was concerned with the Dance only as part of her primarily sexual phantasy.

As extreme as Heppenstall's rhetoric is, it is not atypical. The tension between an elitist ideology of the sacrifice of self to tradition (ballet) and a democratic ideology of the expression of self through an original form (modern dance) still runs deep. In 1986, close on the heels of Gelsey Kirkland's stinging critique of the Balanchine aesthetic as oppressive and inexpressive, Balanchine apologist Lincoln Kirstein dredged up the very same rhetoric in a New York Times article entitled "The Curse of Isadora." From Heppenstall to Kirstein and beyond, all sorts of imaginatively revisionist writers have made out of Isadora a suspect female who capitalized on her near-naked body in the guise of art.

Between the ballerinas' outright dismissal of Duncan as a dilettante and the more sympathetic, feminist claim for her as the mother of us all, where is the reality of Duncan's significance to her American audiences? What role did gender play in her dancing? It is time to revise the revisionists.
HEO RIZING GENDER

Although it is the youthful gamboling that most people associate with Duncan, her choreography, as well as its meanings, changed significantly over the course of her lifetime. Her American tours can be separated into three distinct groups: her initial tours (twice in 1908, once each in 1909 and 1911), during which spectators learned to “read” this new art form; the second group of tours (1914–1915, 1916–1918) during World War I and after the much-publicized deaths of her children, during which she came to symbolize motherhood and nationalistic pride; and the third group (1922–1923) when she returned from Soviet Russia with a young poet husband to a suspicious and increasingly hostile audience. I am interested here in examining her initial American tours, when her dancing was a startling phenomenon.\(^{16}\) Given the sexual interpretations often connected with her dancing, it would seem appealing to use the “male gaze” theory of representation as a framework for analysis.

Contemporary American feminist criticism was developed, in the mid- to late 1970s, through the discourses of psychoanalysis, semiotics, and film theory. It concerned itself mainly with a series of dichotomous relationships: the male and female of the Oedipal construction, the subject and object of the performer–spectator relationship (the male gaze), and the verbal and nonverbal phases of human development. The male gaze, as much a theory of Western cultural communication as anything else, refers to the way in which the structure of representation is gendered. The subject (spectator) and the object (performer)—each assumed to have a stable position in their encounter—operate in two dimensions, on a linear basis of binary opposition. The spectator, the one who looks (who consumes, who possesses), is in the position of power: a traditionally male position. The one who is looked at—the performer who puts her/himself on display for the gaze—is in a passive, traditionally female position. Much of the early feminist project in performance, as in all the arts, was to deconstruct how this model of binary opposition had rendered women secondary in—and even absent from—representation.

Before long, however, feminist critics began calling for more than just deconstruction. They sought to reconstruct a feminist subject\(^{17}\) in representation. It has become clear that the logic of binary opposition and its corollaries—the singular subject and the male gaze—though they have been crucial in understanding how the present system works, are not terribly useful in advancing beyond the problem; for, if patriarchy were truly so monolithic, then there would be no room within it for a feminist subject. And, seductive as they are, utopian visions of a world “elsewhere” are cultural and theoretical impossibilities.

Asking whether or not a choreographer such as Duncan managed to “subvert” or “break” the male gaze will neither advance the feminist project nor necessarily tell us anything about Duncan. In fact, the male gaze theory forces the feminist scholar into a no-win situation that turns on an exceedingly unproductive “succeed or fail” criterion. We expect the choreographer to topple a power structure that we have theorized as monolithic. The dancer or choreographer under consideration will always be condemned as a reinforcement of the patriarchal status quo, despite any transgressive behavior, because, by definition, whatever is communicated arises from within the fabric of culture, that is to say, within patriarchy.

This view really leaves little room for the work of the dance scholar: The outcome of analysis—whether the dancer or choreographer in question is a “success” or “failure” from a feminist point of view—is decided before the analysis is even begun. She will always be a “failure.” Historical study is left in an especially problematic situation, because the male gaze has been theorized as a transhistorical model for Western culture, impermeable to the specifics of time and place. But as we clearly know, the body and its meanings, as well as the nature of display (and, concomitantly, the gaze), do certainly change with period and culture. Furthermore, the metaphor of representation as a “gaze” is not as suited to dance as it is to static visual media such as cinema and art. Dance, although it has a visual component, is fundamentally a kinesthetic art whose apprehension is grounded not just in the eye but in the entire body.

The case of Isadora Duncan is much too rich and too complex to be reduced to a fait accompli. To understand the significance Duncan had to her American audiences from 1908 to 1911, a new theory of representation is required: one that includes within its very structure the capacity for change. I propose that we shift the terms of our inquiry from the two dimensional to the three dimensional. We need to understand culture as a full space (not an empty one) that encompasses transgression without necessarily co-opting it, or else we are doomed to a history without change.

A number of feminist theorists have already devised space-intensive models of representation: Laura Mulvey’s emphasis on the carnivale as a ludic space,\(^{18}\) Teresa de Lauretis’s notion of the space-off,\(^{19}\) Jessica Benjamin’s use of the concept of intersubjective space,\(^{20}\) and Julia Kristeva’s modem of the chora.\(^{21}\) Mulvey, whose “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”\(^{22}\) largely initiated the inquiry into what E. Ann Kaplan dubbed the “male gaze,”\(^{23}\) has criticized her own groundbreaking essay precisely because of its dependence on binary logic: “The either/or binary pattern seemed to leave the argument trapped within its own conceptual frame of reference, unable to advance politically into a new terrain or suggest an alternative theory of spectatorship in the cinema.”\(^{24}\)

Julia Kristeva, in Revolution in Poetic Language, sets forth a theory of representation, really a semiotics of art, that provides an excellent framework within which to analyze the cultural significance of Duncan’s dancing body. Kristeva
starts with the notion that the self is not a thing situated in one position and unchanging over time; rather, the self is a process that fluctuates through space and through time. In other words, we are always in the process of becoming, a phenomenon Kristeva calls a “subject in process/on trial.”

She criticizes traditional semiology because it is based upon the static model of information theory, which emphasizes the message as the final product of codes. Kristeva instead posits semiotics as a process of communication whose complexity and subtlety exceed any simple transfer of information. She therefore conceptualizes literature, or any signifying practice, not as monolithic structure of simple communication but rather as consisting of two inseparable, simultaneous realms: the semiotic and the symbolic.

The realm of the symbolic is linear and logical; it is social and syntactical. By participating in these rules of order, we are able to communicate easily with one another. But the semiotic realm, on the other hand, is a kind of “underground” communication. It is a pulsing, kinetic, heterogeneous space whose meanings are much more fluid and imprecise, yet no less powerful. Kristeva describes this realm as a “chora” (from the Greek for enclosed space, womb), a term borrowed from Plato’s *Timaeus*, defined as “an invisible and formless being which receives all things and in some mysterious way partakes of the intelligible, and is most incomprehensible.” The chora denotes something “[i]ndifferent to language, enigmatic . . . rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; it is musical, anterior to judgment.”

All signifying practices contain both the semiotic and the symbolic, although one realm usually suppresses the other. Thus a potentially subversive element is posited even in the most traditional signifying system. The extent to which the semiotic is pulled out to rupture the symbolic—thus pulverizing, imploding, infinitizing its meanings—determines the potential “production of a different kind of subject, one capable of bringing about new social relations.” This is the “revolution” to which Kristeva refers in the title of her book. Revolutionary art need not be overtly political in content; what is more important is that it demand a new means of perception on the part of its spectators. The subject in process/on trial can thus be fundamentally transformed. Change here, at the level of individual consciousness, is a necessary element of social change. Seen in this way, the arts are not merely reflective of social relations but are productive of social relations.

For a feminist dance historian, this schema is particularly congenial, for several reasons. First, Kristeva’s theory conceives of representation as a process, not as a vocabulary, syntax, and grammar of discrete units like letters or words. Dance, an art by definition in constant evolution over time and through space, cannot be explained through linguistic semiotics, as a building-block arrange-
stigmatized only with the entrance into language. Because psychoanalysis has been the basis of so much feminist theory in literature and cinema, it has been difficult for dance scholars to appropriate those logocentric models.

Daniel Stern, however, has refigured some of the basic psychoanalytic assumptions that pit the verbal against the nonverbal in a developmental hierarchy. By reconsidering psychoanalytic theory in light of what developmental psychologists have learned empirically about infancy in the past decade, he has defused the rhetoric of the "pre-verbal" by suggesting that (1) the infant progresses not from symbiosis to differentiation but from differentiation to relatedness; (2) the infant does relate as a sense of self to others through movement before learning to talk; and (3) these bodily senses of self and their corresponding nonverbal means of relatedness persist even after the acquisition of language. Whether verbal or nonverbal, these various means of relatedness are not temporal "phases" that are eclipsed with each developmental step; rather, they are spatial "domains" that accumulate into a full complement of adult interpersonal processes.

Stern's revised psychoanalytic model suspends the classic binary opposition between the verbal and its negative term, the "pre-verbal" (that is, the body, movement, nonverbal behavior, dance). Furthermore, it renders unfounded our culture's romantic, and sexist, notions of pre-verbal existence as the feminine realm of the "other." Nevertheless, the cultural marginalization of the nonverbal is deeply ingrained. The nonverbal stream of our everyday encounters, Stern observes, are eminently deniable. We cannot deny our words, but we can always deny the "body language" with which we deliver them. Similarly, Kristeva sees gesture as highly marginal. Ideally, gesture (and dance, by extension) is an excessively semiotic process—a trace, really—whose significance we can understand without its being embedded in literal meaning. It lives in between and across the semiotic and the symbolic, testing the outer limits of what it takes to produce signification.

That which is so marginal as to be deniable has obvious subversive potential. Kristeva's project of paradox is to appropriate marginality—whether it be femininity, race, or class—for subversive ends: "to make intelligible, and therefore socializable, what rocks the foundations of sociality." It is only by working through the semiotic, she suggests, that we can implode the symbolic. The study of gesturality, which may be as close as one can get to a pure chora, would be "a possible preparation for the study of all subversive and 'deviant' practices in a given society." It is partly because dance (which is, after all, culture's aestheticized gesturality) had such a marginal status in American culture at the turn of the century that Isadora Duncan was able to manipulate it so successfully as a means of social critique and that her spectators were able to appropriate it so successfully as an enactment of their respective agendas. To her liberal yet mainstream Progressivist spectators, she embodied an optimistic belief in the reformability of the social and political system. To her radical spectators—including suffragists, anarchists, and socialists—she enacted a paradigm of complete social rupture.

When Duncan toured America in 1908, 1909, and 1911, her reputation as the "Barefoot Classic Dancer" had preceded her from Europe. Newspaper accounts had reported on her rise to fame and her colorful lifestyle even since her first Parisian appearances in 1906. Broadway producer Charles Frohman initially imported the dancer as a Broadway novelty in late summer 1908, pushing up the original September debut in order to preempt the appearances of Duncan imitators who were spreading across two continents. She fared poorly in the summer Broadway venue, whose audiences expected light entertainment. When her subsequent Frohman tour also began badly, she released the producer from his contract in order to tour with the esteemed conductor Walter Damrosch and the New York Symphony Orchestra, beginning with a second "debut" in November, this time at the Metropolitan Opera House. The Duncan/Damrosch tour was a success, as were her subsequent American appearances when she traveled primarily to large northeastern cities. Duncan's repertoire included the dance interludes from Gluck's Iphigénie en Aulide, scenes from Gluck's Orpheus, Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, and a Bach/Wagner program, as well as selections from Chopin and Tchaikovsky. Her encore included Schubert's Moment Musicales and the ever-beloved Blue Danube Waltz by Johann Strauss.

What did Duncan's American audiences see onstage during those early tours? What did it mean for them? Although Duncan's bare limbs were certainly an issue for her audiences, I am not willing to begin with the premise of the male gaze theory, that what they saw was first and foremost an objectified female body. That may be what we, from the late twentieth century, would see, but our way of seeing was not necessarily their way of seeing.

Just because Duncan's limbs were bare does not mean her performance was necessarily seen as erotic. Her bare legs and feet were as potentially distasteful to some as they were titillating to others. Her homemade, nip-and-tuck tunics were anything but glamorous. They emphasized an abundant figure, quite the contrary of the hourglass curves that were then the erotic ideal. The tunics were quite modest, because attached inside the shoulders of each one was a leotard-style undergarment, made of the same cloth as the outer tunic. Furthermore, Duncan danced with her entire body, as an integrated whole; she did nothing to isolate and thereby heighten the sensuality of her breasts, legs, or pelvis.

Without exception, newspapermen (primarily music critics) felt compelled to make immediate comment upon whether or not the barefoot dancer was indeed
a proper sight. The public was ripe for indignation, in no small part because Duncan's American debut came in the midst of an epidemic of Salome acts—no less than twenty-four in vaudeville in October 1908. But reviewer after reviewer stated unequivocally that there was nothing "sensational" about Duncan's dancing; it was, rather, quite "chaste." Current Literature reported that

Miss Isadora Duncan has not given the Salome dance in her present tour through the United States. She refuses to sacrifice her art to the sensationalism and the vulgarity of the hour. In her dance the purely physical plays no part. She dances scantily clad, remarks a writer in the New York Sun. "The fact that her feet and legs are unclothed is forgotten. It is part of the picture. Miss Duncan therefore does not rely upon physical charms to add to her success, as do some of the so-called dancers who are present doing various sorts of stunts on both sides of the water. Her success comes through her grace and ease of movement, not on account of her ability to kick or wiggle or do acrobatic tricks." 37

Even before her actual appearances, it was clear that Duncan offered something different, if only for the reason that no one else had ever devoted an entire evening to dancing solo, without respite of song, skit, or recitation. Before they set foot in the theater, the public was predisposed to accept Duncan on legitimately artistic terms for two main reasons. First, she placed herself within the Hellenistic tradition, which was then considered the pinnacle of genuine artistry. Second, she had been acclaimed by European royalty, artists, and intellectuals. At a time when America was struggling to develop a cultural tradition of its own, the imprimatur of European high culture held ultimate authority. It did not hurt, either, that this high priestess of the Terpsichorean Art could be claimed as one of America's own daughters.

That is not to say, however, that Duncan's reputation as a barefoot dancer was not in some cases a drawing card for the curious and for the erotic appetite. Since the 1880s, images of ballet girls and actresses ("stage beauties") had functioned as pinups in dubious publications such as the National Police Gazette and even in more respectable ones such as Munsey's. 38

Whatever her audience's expectations, they were confounded by the dancer's actual performance. Duncan's dancing was different than anything that had previously hit the American stage. She did not construct herself as a visual spectacle, as her contemporaries did, performing a string of steps in mechanical time in some thematic costume, complete with backdrop. Ballet girls and vaudeville dancers were step dancers; their legs were their stock-in-trade, and not much of interest happened in the rest of their bodies. They operated in a pictorial mode, striking pose after pose or performing trick after trick. This was entertainment, whose appeal lay in the shapeliness of the female form, the successful (maybe even graceful) achievement of physical feats, and the novelty of the mise-en-scène. This image was what filled the pages of the Police Gazette. In Kristeva's terms, the entertainment was the countenance of the symbolic realm of early-twentieth-century dance.

Because Duncan's dancing did not conform to these easily readable conventions, many of her reviewers found themselves at a loss for words. (Dance criticism, it should be noted, was only in its infancy. The first full-time dance critic would not be appointed for twenty years.) The critics spent a lot moral space rhapsodizing on the aesthetic beauty of her dancing rather than describing how she achieved her effects. Although they knew not exactly what she was intending in some of her dances, they assured their readers that it was a "poetic" experience all the same. Interestingly enough, Kristeva's own term for the expression of the inexpressible was the same one used widely in Duncan's time by critics of theater and art to denote the same thing: an expression that is beyond the grasp of conventional communication, whose meaning is deeper, more oblique, and more profound. Other critics voiced that same feeling in stronger terms, declaring outright that the exquisiteness and depth of Duncan's expression defied being put into words at all. She was revealing something about the powers of the dancing body that had never been enacted onstage before, and neither her audience nor the critics had discovered the vocabulary to articulate this strangely ephemeral, transcendent, elusive vision.

In the meantime, they turned—quite reasonably—to the discourse on the academic nude, rooted in the classical visual arts. 39 It gave the critics at least some way to discuss the beauty and nobility of her dancing body. By this late date, however, the Victorian discourse was fraught with hypocrisy. It often functioned as a thinly disguised sanction of erotic spectacle in the name of "art." Despite the use of this suspect rhetoric in Duncan's review, it is clear from their uniformly serious and respectful tone that she did appeal to them on artistic grounds. Unfortunately, the only language they possessed to discuss this phenomenon was one that belied the nature of their experience.

The line between the chaste and the erotic is hardly a solid one, anyway. "The barriers between what is deemed licit and illicit, acceptably seductive or wantonly salacious, aesthetic or prurient," Abigail Solomon-Godeau has written, "are never solid because contingent, never steadfast because they traffic with each other—are indeed dependent upon each another." 40 Just as Solomon-Godeau has shown that for photography in late-nineteenth-century Paris the "chaste" had become "erotic," so, for a brief time when Duncan's choreographic invention was new to America, the "erotic" became "chaste."
The press's reaction is typified by the Chicago Daily Tribune's description of her debut in Chicago in 1908:

Of Miss Duncan's dancing it is not the easiest thing in the world to write. It is so elusive, so fine, so delicate in its grace, and so perfect in its technic that it needs to be seen rather than read about. To say that she appears with bare feet, legs, and arms, and so gauzily draped for many of the dances that the whole form is clearly defined, is to suggest to the reader something of the sensational and possibly the prurient.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Miss Duncan, when she is dancing, gives no hint to the onlooker of her being in anywise naked or unusually bared. The idea of sex seems wholly obliterated when watching her. The spirit of youth and of joyousness seems embodied for the moment before you, and there is nothing more of sex in her appearance than there is in boyhood or maidenhood.

When the dancer comes forward to acknowledge applause she is unmistakably feminine—girlish, perhaps, but essentially of the woman conscious and confident. But when she is dancing, the fact of her being a woman and of her feet and limbs being bare never makes itself realized. This is sincere commendation of her art and in fullest justification of her manner of dressing for her dances.41

Duncan had made it a rule never to perform in vaudeville houses or music halls.42 She played in legitimate theaters, concert halls, and opera houses, where she transformed the stage into a mythic space. She effectively metamorphosed the stage, paradoxically, by not attempting to make it into something other than itself. There were no illusionary sets or props. A simple set of tall, voluminous, blue-gray curtains surrounded the stage on three sides, and there was a similarly colored carpet underfoot. Having dispensed with the harsh glare of the footlights, Duncan placed the light sources in either wing. They were soft tones—ambers and pinks mostly, but never stark white—that gently muted the stage in shadow and light.

Into this awaiting space, unmoored from any particular time and place, flooded the sound of the orchestra. It always played for a while first, sometimes as much as the first movement of a symphony. Only after the space had been enshrouded in melody and rhythm would the dancer slip through the shadows into the audience's awareness. She did not play characters per se; instead, she preferred to function as did the Greek chorus, allowing the movement to convey universal emotion. In this dim radiance, Duncan surged and floated, gathering inward and spreading outward, without a hint of self-consciousness. Duncan looked a vision, her tunic as alive as her body, the garment's light gauze catching the force of her curving, swaying, onrushing motion.

Her vocabulary was simple. She used basic ambulatory steps, adapted from the social dances of her childhood. She stopped, skipped, hopped, and jumped; but that was merely what she did to get from here to there. It was how she moved (and sometimes how she stood still) that distinguished her dancing, that imploed the conventional syntax of the ballet girl or chorine.

First, Duncan's body was always moving of a single piece, the torso and the limbs integrated seemingly without any effort. Gesture and pantomime (she was a very talented mime) were never isolated; they were always woven into the flow of bodily movement. There was a strong oppositional pull in her movement—her torso twisting to the left while her arms motioned to the right, for example—that gave her a potent dynamism. The impulse of her movements visibly originated from the center of her body (the solar plexus), and that energy flowed freely outward, like a wave, through her head, arms, legs, and into the furthest reaches of space. She achieved a kind of groundedness at the same time that her arms floated—a rare mixture of strength and grace. While the ballet girl's arms etched static lines, Duncan's were always carving out sculptural space in three dimensions. And unlike the typical dancer of her day who went mechanically from pose to pose, Duncan's movements melted one into the next, into the next, into the next, with seamless ease.

She was extraordinarily sensitive to the dynamic qualities of movement. In fact, much of her effect was communicated through her genius for choreographing the drama of the kinesthetic—the sense of intentionality communicated through activated weight, the attentiveness signaled through spatial sensitivity, and the impression of decisiveness or indecisiveness gained through the manipulation of time. Today we take for granted the expressive potential of these formal means of movement, but in Duncan's day, they were revolutionary. Her powers of focus and concentration—her ability to stay fully alive inside each moment—produced a compelling sense of presence.

Duncan had an uncanny instinct for musicality, which is the temporal expressiveness within the way music unexpectedly stretches out or rushes ahead. Instead of dancing squarely on the beat, she played with the elasticity of her accompaniment's rhythm, embedding hesitancy, fear, longing, or a whole host of inner states by variously quickening or suspending her movement through time. Paradoxically, although Duncan revealed her flesh in unprecedented quantity, she effectively dematerialized her body in the expressive force of the music.

Reviewers constantly articulated this distinction between what they perceived in Duncan's dancing and what they actually saw, because the stuff of her dancing was not physical. It was virtual;43 that is, there was more happening onstage than a dancer simply moving her body parts. As writer/reformer Bolton Hall wrote:

It is not dancing, tho' dancing is of it. It is vital motion, expressing emotion. Unlike the ordinary dancing, it has no set pattern or subordinate motif increasingly repeated.
IEORIZING GENDER

It has structure and design, but so closely allied to its beauty and grace that it can only be perceived, not seen.\(^44\)

Duncan gave the impression of dancing spontaneously, even though her dances were choreographed.\(^45\) As Hall wrote, there was "structure and design," but spectators could not discern it while they were experiencing the dancing. They were not meant to discern it. The choreography was very simple, usually a gently repetitious, symmetrical scheme supporting the kinesesthetic drama of the piece, primarily through the use of body level (up and down) and floor pattern (side to side, front to back, diagonal to diagonal). Again, as with her vocabulary, structure served only as a framework, meant to recede from view as the work was performed.

Thus, for her American spectators between 1908 and 1911, Duncan's body effectively dissolved in the act of performance. H. T. Parker (a fine writer who worked as a theater, music, and dance critic) of the Boston Transcript described this phenomenon as "this innocence, this spontaneity, this idealized and disembodied quality in her dancing." A perceptive, anonymous critic from the Philadelphia Telegraph wrote similarly that Duncan was "an absolutely rare and lovely impersonation of the spirit of music, more like a sweet thought than a woman, more like a dream creation than an actual flesh and blood entity."\(^47\)

Duncan's dancing was a paradigm of the late-nineteenth-century symbolist aesthetic, captured in Walter Pater's dictum that "all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music." Unfettered by character, plot, mise-en-scène, or the conventions of the ballet girl, Duncan stirred the imagination with her poetic, nonrational form of communication. In Kristeva's terms, she was enacting the chora, tapping into a realm of meaning that was not linear, not logical, not mimetic. When Duncan began dancing, whether her spectators' preconceptions were sacred or profane, it was clear that she was neither an entertainer nor a performer in the theater's realistic tradition. She was, instead, as a number of reviewers called her, a "symbolic dancer," whose capacity to communicate meaning went beyond that of apparent convention. (What they called symbolic at that time is what Kristeva called semiotic almost a century later.) The poet Shaemas O'Sheel wrote that

Isadora Duncan's dancing is no less than an interpretation of life in symbols. Watching her I have felt that I was watching the Soul of Man moving in the Dance of Destiny. The term "dance" has a very different and very much more serious significance when used to indicate Miss Duncan's work than it has when standing for even the most talented and delightful of ordinary stage dancing. It connotes not merely something pretty and happy, something to beguile and amuse; it is an expression of the impulse which is a dream of all beauty; it is a questioning, an aspiration, a thrill with hopes and fears, desires and joys and melancholies, and ever with wonder.\(^48\)

What was so extraordinary about Duncan for those early, American audiences was that she made visible the inner impulses, stirrings, vibrations of the soul. When Duncan initiated a motion from her solar plexus, then successively lifted her chest and raised her head heavenward or threw it backward Dionysically, it was a stunning embodiment of Nietzschean Will. Ongoing movement became a metaphor for what they then termed "soul," what we call the self. The dancing body was no longer a product—of training, of narrative, of consumption—but rather a process. The dance was about becoming a self (the subject-in-process/on trial) rather than about displaying a body.

Duncan essentially played out the drama of a self yearning for something, or somebody—an ideal, really—that continually obsessed her. All her life she was dogged by the inability to integrate all the different aspects of herself, and her early choreography was about a person—not necessarily a woman, not necessarily a man—yearning and searching and, in that process, finding beauty and pleasure. Even today, the choreography is not taught as a series of steps but as narratives of someone moving forward but being pushed backward by an unseen force, for example, or of someone repeatedly looking here and there for something beyond reach. Those were the virtual forces that drove the choreography; and, at a time when America was obsessed with finding for itself a national selfhood, a cultural identity, and a means of individual self-expression, spectators were primed to participate in this dancing subject-in-process.

America was poised on the threshold of modernism, a moment when corporate organization threatened the primacy of the individual and mass production threatened the uniqueness of the individual. According to cultural historian Jackson Lears:

For many, individual identities began to seem fragmented, diffuse, perhaps even unreal. A weightless culture of material comfort and spiritual blandness was breeding weightless persons who longed for intense experience to give some definition, some distinct outline and substance to their vaporous lives.\(^49\)

Duncan's dancing provided that intense experience, connecting with the innermost reaches of the soul. As a teenager, she had been influenced by Delsarteism, which was absorbed into the larger physical cultural movement at the turn of the century. Delsarte and physical culture manuals\(^50\) (forerunners of the contemporary self-help guide) circulated widely, promoting the idea that the individual did indeed have control over her fate through physical activity, whether calisthenics, dance, or sport. The message of these manuals spread through popular magazines and women's clubs: outward behavior could be changed as a means of improving one's inner being.
The origin of the self was thus effectively relocated from God to human. The self could be constructed and reconstructed through behavior, which became a conspicuous mark of identity that embedded the theatrical into everyday life. If you changed the way you carried yourself, the way you walked, and the way you gestured, you could then bring about fundamental changes: physical health, moral improvement, aesthetic grace. In effect, you could be whomever you wanted to be. America soon found its longed-for identity in the "self-made man."

Duncan was one of America's first self-made women. She was constantly reimagining herself, both onstage and in her interviews. (My Life was only the last in a long line of autobiographical narratives.) She embraced the importance of this connection between the internal and the external, and out of it she created a new art of the dance. Dance was no longer about the spectacular display of the legs for entertainment's sake; it was now about the self's inner impulses made manifest through the rhythmic, dynamic expression of the whole body. To Duncan, freedom meant being able to give presence to those otherwise invisible stirrings (consequently, she did away with the studio mirror, because it emphasized external image rather than inner impetus). Her dances of the early period were essentially about the self in formation. Constantly ongoing movement provided the perfect metaphor for that fluid identity.

Moreover, hers was a kinesthetic experience in which the spectators actively participated. From the mythic stage space to the familiarity of the music, from the accessibility of the vocabulary to the flow and ease of her movement style, Duncan constructed a literal and metaphorical theater environment that included the spectators. Her Progressive-era audiences were filled with marginalized Americans—women, artists, radicals, intellectuals—whose vision of a new social order was marked by unchecked optimism. They moved with this universal being onstage, this subject-in-process whose unspecified longings they could fill in with their own specific agendas. One writer recalled:

I remember when I first saw her...I shuddered with awe. In this...free, simple, happy, expressive, rhythmic movement was focussed all I and a hundred others had been dreaming. This was our symbol, the symbol of a new art, a new literature, a new national polity, a new life.51

Duncan started with the known, normative discourses of the symbolic—Greek sculpture, physical culture, even the leg show—and took her spectators to what was unknown inside themselves: "This solitary figure on the lonely stage suddenly confronts each of us with the secret of a primal desire invincibly inhering in the fibre of each, a secret we had securely hidden beneath our conventional behaviors, and we yearn for a new and liberated order in which we may indeed dance."52 She activated the chora, creating in the theater a fluid, porous pulsing space of representation that invited spectators to engage in the dancing as a subject-in-process. She created a space of intelligibility into which the unintelligible—in this case, the kinesthetic and all its attendant emotions—erupted. For a time, her spectators reveled in this freely moving self, for it offered them the possibility "to make intelligible, and therefore socializable, what rocks the foundations of sociality."

—Gender and Performance, ed. Laurence Senelick, 1992

About Interpretation
Joann McNamara Interviews Ann Daly

JOANN MCNAMARA: Can you describe the interpretive approach you used in your article "Dance History and Feminist Theory: Reconsidering Isadora Duncan and the Male Gaze"? You seem to be looking at Isadora Duncan's dancing rather than just a dance, per se.

ANN DALY: Dancing is a con/textual practice. I don't think that you can just look at the dance and not the context or that you can just look at the context without the dance. I'm devoted to both formal analysis and contextual analysis. I began this project with Duncan's practice—very closely tracking her writings and her dancing—and then I moved outward into the context and negotiated between the two.

MCNAMARA: Do you consider this an approach, a perspective, or an actual method?

DALY: I don't know what the difference is between an approach and a method. The term "method" comes from science, where it means that you have something that can be replicated by others to verify your findings. Obviously that's not possible, or even desirable, in the humanities. Is deconstruction a philosophy or a method? Is feminist theory an approach or a method?

MCNAMARA: What was the initial value of feminist theory when you began using it—or even now?

DALY: Feminist analysis is useful to me because it gets to the very issue of how dance means. How does this dance make meaning? Who makes meaning, where does it come from? What is it inside and outside the dance that gives us the clues to its meaning? Feminist theory was articulating a theory of representation in a fresh way and connecting to my semiotic interest in the production of meaning. The theorists said: "There is a structure of representation, which is a visual one. And it's gendered." This idea of the male gaze was a very powerful
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one, and it gave me a way to keep thinking about how meaning is constituted in dance. But as I started work on Duncan, within a historical rather than contemporary time period, I found the theory of the male gaze problematic. That is basically what this article is about. This theory, which was so tremendously rich and provoked so many different lines of analysis, had been around for enough time that we began to see that it was not perfect and that it was not all-encompassing. It was not necessarily going to help me to understand how audiences in late-nineteenth/early-twentieth-century America saw and made meaning of Duncan’s dancing. Along parallel tracks, I had become interested in Kristeva in graduate school, because she posits a theory of culture—of patriarchy—that is not monolithic. Feminist analysis is political. It aims to bring about change.

Any theory of culture has to be able to allow for change—or else, what’s it for? If you buy into the male gaze theory, which posits that everything is constructed from a male point of view, and you also believe that we are all constructed within culture, there’s nowhere to go. We’re stuck. Which is rather depressing. And for several years I didn’t engage feminist theory. I focused on historical work. Kristeva, however, posits a theory of culture that allows for change from within. There had been theorizing about how we can change culture from an “elsewhere.” Is there an “elsewhere” outside culture? Well, no, there isn’t. So for me Kristeva articulates a way that you can change from within, because that’s the only place where you can create change. She also allows a space for nonverbal representation and the nonverbal basis of culture. This interests me a lot, and I’m going to pursue it in my next project. I think of this project as the beginning of an effort to tease out a cultural theory that will apply to dance as a nonverbal phenomenon. The feminism will be there, but not explicitly.

Mcnamara: Can you describe your cognitive processes when you’ve used this approach? In other words, what were the cognitive processes that you went through?

Daly: I break it down into four intertwined, simultaneous processes: observation, analysis, interpretation and judgement. Each of us privileges or is more comfortable with one or several of these four. I consciously monitor and deploy them sequentially in my long-term working process. When I did the Duncan research—it’s been about four years and I’m still working on it—I began by systematically looking at her documentation. I wasn’t sure what all my lines of analysis would be. Some people might call that disingenuous, but I really wasn’t sure what the issues were going to be. I knew gender was going to be an issue, but I didn’t realize race and class would enter so clearly. I started by looking for clues to her movement. The first thing was to figure out what it was that she did. And to try to get a sense of historical-cultural specificity. It was very important to me to place her dancing in the specific contexts of her audiences at particular periods and locations. The same dances that she did in 1908 in the Criterion Theatre meant very different things than they did at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1922. I was very careful not to erase those differences. So, I wanted to establish what it was she did and what and in what context. I was trying to reconstruct, in my head—I use the word “reconstruct” very loosely—a picture of how she moved. Then I was also very interested in her words, how she was constructing her discourse through a verbal mode. I spent a lot of time trying to visualize her practice, and then I started to undertake analysis and interpretation. I’m not saying that I wasn’t implicitly doing analysis and interpretation earlier on, but now it became explicit and conscious.

At this point I am doing a critical rereading of the work, in particular the effects of Duncan’s discourse on constructing African “savagery” and “primitivism.”

Mcnamara: What’s your role as an interpreter when you’re using this approach?

Daly: I’m creating meaning, the meaning made from my position. Everyone wants to think that her interpretation of Isadora is the interpretation, but there are many interpretations of Isadora. What’s so interesting about her is that she intentionally and consciously created a myth of herself. There is no essential Isadora. I’m of two minds about my role, actually. You have to start with facts. I mean, you can’t just hallucinate out of nothing. There is the narrative nature of history. It’s a story, a fiction that we fashion. So, on the one hand, I researched like hell and went back to original sources and manuscript collections. Detailed primary research is the basis of it all. But once I’ve gotten as far as I can with trying to find all of my “evidence,” it’s still this scholar making up the story. You can look at the same material I did. You’re a different person, so you will ask different questions and you will see different connections. So, I’d have to say that I am creating meaning and I can only be creating meaning from Ann Daly in 1993 as a female, white, middle-class, heterosexual American. But even the “facts,” in the case of Isadora Duncan, are sometimes in dispute. One of the reasons I am studying her is that she is a void. We have no films of her dancing. She is an absence, palpably present, in our dance history. To me that’s an irresistible challenge and fascination. I’m effectively reconstructing her dancing. My role is kind of as a sleuth, in a way, to try to find as much good information as I can, tracking down all of the leads—as a creator of meaning, and as a writer. I am a writer by profession. I think of my work in writerly terms. My role is also to make this live for the reader. I am very, very conscious of the reader.

Mcnamara: Is the historical context of feminism important to you?

Daly: Well, yes. Part of the reason that you can’t glom the male gaze onto Isadora is that feminism meant something different in her day. When we call her “the first liberated woman,” we’re using the term in the sense that we know it today. But the way they thought of feminism (and feminism wasn’t even a
word yet—it was called the "woman movement") was very important. I couldn't talk about Duncan's feminism without knowing what feminism meant during her lifetime. That was where I started. What was subversive about what she was doing within the context of women and the woman movement?

MCNAMARA: What do you think is the primary advantage of this interpretive approach and does it have any weaknesses?

DALY: Well, one of the big advantages is that it asks different questions and yields new information. New knowledge is only produced by asking different questions. And in a field where most of the artists have been women, it has its obvious advantage. Weaknesses—well, I think any approach has weaknesses. Its greatest strength is its greatest weakness, because it asks some questions and ignores others. Feminist analysis is looking at gender, but it doesn't address issues of race and class per se. In the past five or so years, though, feminist theory has developed in that direction.

MCNAMARA: What does this article say to you now and what do you think it says to its readers? Do you think that this has changed over time?

DALY: It tells me that I have a lot more work to do. It says that it's real hard to integrate history and theory. Some people glorify onto history. Some historians are theory-phobic. It took me a long time to write this article, because it's a challenge to deeply intersect theory and history—in a synergistic way—without doing violence to either one. It says to me that I have some rich veins that I need to mine. It says to the reader—I don't know what it says to the reader. You'd have to ask the reader, I think.

MCNAMARA: What's the overall purpose of the article?

DALY: Several things. On one level its purpose was to say that we just can't keep repeating the same Duncan line, that the current history is too easy and that maybe there are new ways of thinking about it. Second, its purpose was to work toward creating a historically-informed model of feminist theory for dance. And, conversely, working toward a more theoretical model of dance history.

MCNAMARA: How does it negotiate the notion of body?

DALY: In part, I tried to suggest that, just because Duncan wasn't wearing clothing on her arms and legs, we should not assume her as having been read as erotic. As art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau demonstrates, the line between the chaste and the erotic is a shifting one. So, I guess I was trying, again, to negotiate the body as something whose meanings change across time and space. How we'd read it today isn't necessarily how audiences would have read it back then.

MCNAMARA: What about the way that this article negotiates the notion of time?

DALY: There is a gap between today and yesterday, and our challenge as his-
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Daly: With this essay I tried something different, structurally. I'm a very linear person, linear thinker, logical. And I know how to structure writing very well linearly. I wanted to write this piece more circularly, or in a spiral. It's divided into three parts, and they don't necessarily flow into each other seamlessly. There's a little bit of a conceptual space and a corresponding visual break between the three sections. The basic questions and historical details, as I recall, are discussed in the first section. Kristeva theory is deployed in the second section. In the third section I tried to pull together the history and theory. I think one of the possible weaknesses of the article is that the third section really doesn't close the loop. It's more suggestive than explicit, which echoes the form of Isadora herself. She suggested images; she never explicitly denoted them.

McNamara: What, if any, are your experiences of time when you are, or when you were: observing a dance, writing about a dance, editing your writing, finished with your text?

Daly: It depends upon the dance, when I'm observing. There's lived time, as distinct from chronological time. With a really good dance, time is subsumed into space, and you're in that place where you're not measuring time, it just opens out three-dimensionally. Other times you're just marking time until the house lights come up again.

McNamara: What was your sense of time when you were writing your article?

Daly: On a literal level, I had to find the time to write it while I was teaching. You have to find those pockets of time that are large enough that you can do something meaningful. So the sense of time was always about being squeezed in, or was a negotiation with other responsibilities. There was not a luxurious sense of time, but a quite pressured sense of time. But when I'm in that flow, time opens up into space. You kind of drop out of clock time. But for me that never lasts too long. It comes in spurts. You plod along in very metrical time, and then something clicks. You reach critical mass and you kind of get lost in that flow. Then, right after, I usually make a breakthrough. I figured out a connection, for example. Then I usually take a break. That always worried me, actually—why don't I just keep going with it after I've made a breakthrough? I was discussing this with a playwright. She described it as "the cigarette syndrome"—like needing a cigarette after you reached your climax. It makes sense—after reaching that moment of intensity, you kind of cool off for a while. Me, I usually eat. Now that was writing. Editing is more linear. I go through the text for grammar, I go through to check the quotes, I go through for continuity, I go through for logic of argument.

McNamara: What about when you're finished with your text?

Daly: It's all gone.

—1993 (unpublished)

Gender Issues in Dance History Pedagogy

In his book Beyond the Culture Wars, English professor Gerald Graff recalls his early and persistent aversion to reading books.1 Nevertheless, he drifted into a solidly liberal arts English major in college, and suffered tongue-tied in the face of the classics until graduate school. What finally turned him on to literature, history, and other intellectual pursuits, he writes, was not the books themselves, but critical debates. Even Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn left him cold, until an instructor mentioned that there was disagreement over the last part of the novel.

Graff's central argument is that critical debate should be integral to teaching literature, that books do not inherently yield their "hidden meanings" to young minds. The point, he argues, is not to teach dogmatically one interpretation or the other, but to teach the conflict itself. That is, to present the various interpretations to students, who should learn to process the debate for themselves. Being invited to join in the discussion empowers students as active thinkers rather than passive memorizers.

The situation is not so different with dance history studies. Reading Graff's book was like looking into my own classroom. It challenged me to think about the ways that the critical debate surrounding gender and dance could be used to bring intellectual and personal excitement into dance academics.

Critical debate pertaining to issues of race, gender, and class are as applicable to dance as they are to literature and art. Students should be encouraged to question their textbooks, their curriculum, and yes, even their teachers. One of my students, for example, asked what the lower classes did during the Renaissance, because the text and my lecture specifically focused on court dances. I was thrilled when another student expressed her discomfort with a discussion of butoh (Japanese postmodern dance), in which references to white body paint and the darkness of the unconscious appeared to reinforce racial stereotypes. Her comment was followed by an amazing discussion about the construction of American modern dance as positioned against black jazz dance and the Oriental "darkie," as I suggested that we use Toni Morrison's theory2 to examine the rhetoric of Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis. These are, as they say, teachable moments.

Students are eager, even if at first shy, to discuss such issues. And it is important for educators to encourage these discussions, because gender analysis—along with social analyses of race, class, and sexuality—will lead to new knowledge. Not only new knowledge about dance as an aesthetic and a cultural practice, but also self-knowledge. In this way, dance education makes itself an integral part of the humanities curriculum.

My goals in using gender as a frame for critical debate in dance history stud-

7. Feminist dance scholarship has become a regular feature of annual conferences of the Dance Critics Association, the Society of Dance History Scholars, the Congress on Research in Dance, and the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, whose Women and Theatre program holds its own pre-conference each year. Most of these organizations offer conference transcripts, proceedings, or audiotapes.


DANCE HISTORY AND FEMINIST THEORY: RECONSIDERING ISADORA DUNCAN AND THE MALE GAZE

1. Drafts of this essay were delivered at the 1990 annual conference of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education as well as at a fall 1990 installment of the Women’s Studies Research Seminars at the University of Texas at Austin. I appreciate the insightful comments offered to me in those arenas. In particular, I would like to thank Mark Franko, Peter Jelavich, and Amy Koritz for their perceptive responses. Also, thanks to Lori Bellove, Julia Levien, and Hortense Kooluris for sharing their understanding of Duncan dancing and technique. Any shortcomings in the essay, however, are my own.

2. Historically, the term and concept of "feminism" only began to supplant "woman movement," the nineteenth-century phraseology, in the 1920s. However, "feminism" (whose proponents distinguished it from "suffragism") was not entered into the Oxford English Dictionary until its 1933 supplement. Duncan spoke mostly in universal terms, rarely referring to specific political situations or movements such as suffragism. See Nancy F Cott, The Grounding of Modern Feminism (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987).

3. Floyd Dell, Women as World Builders: Studies in Modern Feminism (Westport, Conn.: Hyperion Press, 1976), 44.

4. Ibid., 49.

5. Ibid.


7. Elizabeth Kendall’s groundbreaking study of early American modern dance, Where She Danced: The Birth of American Art-Dance (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), and Nancy Lee Chalifa Ruyer’s study of Delsartism, Reformers and Visionaries: The Americanization of the Art of Dance (New York: Dance Horizons, 1979), are notable exceptions. They mined important new historical evidence and made fresh connections between Duncan and American culture. Ironically, however, their originality has now become grist for the mill of recycled history.


10. That is not to say that the book is an untruth or useless. The work of Duncan’s autobiography as historical evidence is not so much in the “truths” it imparts as in how Duncan constructs her vision of those "truths.” Without the pretense of being a historical record, My Life offers us the seeds of a history, which we must take responsibility for sowing.


12. At the root of Heppenstall’s elaborate objection to Duncan is a near-paranoid fear of female sexuality. Although Heppenstall faults Duncan for being transparently sexual, he builds his own supposedly disinterested theory of dance on implicit models of male versus female orgasm:

He [the dancer] commits rape and begets lovely forms in his own body, with continual increase of power. His material, the field of his creative experience, is his own muscular and nervous being. And his fulfillment is in the externalised joy of movement, the release, the building up of inherent tensions into a powerful system of release. This is the only true freedom. It is the kind of joy and freedom we call dancing. Not the joy of an inward, an unprotected ecstasy, which can only be communicated through erotic sympathy and sympathy between the Dancer and the onlooker. (Ibid., 288, emphasis mine)

13. The term “choreography” is a twentieth-century phenomenon. A very early, if not the earliest, use of the term was in an article on Duncan entitled “Emotional Expression”: 
"Her sister reads the poem which she is to interpret choreographically, and an accompaniment harmonizing with the words and sentiments is played on the piano" ("Emotional Expression," New York Herald [20 February 1898]). The article was reprinted in Director, a magazine of "dancing, deportment, etiquette, aesthetics, physical training" ("Emotional Expression," Director, 1 no. 4 [March 1898]: 109–11).


16. A Californian by birth (and temperament), Duncan had originally plied her art in the East, in high society venues, but she went to Europe in 1899 to make her name in the world of legitimate theater. The American tours beginning in 1908 were in effect her "first" appearances here.

17. I borrow the term "feminist subject" from Teresa de Lauretis. It recognizes the postmodern feminist's dilemma in wanting to posit a female subjectivity while also recognizing the myth of the singular subject. See Teresa de Lauretis, Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987).


19. See de Lauretis, Technologies of Gender.


24. Mulvey, "Changes," 162. Not unrelated to this turn toward space as an organizing metaphor is a renewed interest in the body, which creates the very field in and around it, whether on the microlevel (social interaction, choreography) or the macrolevel (culture). But in studying the body and the meanings it generates, feminist and cultural theorists vary widely in their willingness to confront the body as a material as well as symbolic object and to deal with the body as the ground of perception. Dance studies have much to offer feminist and cultural studies precisely because the object of study is the body, that crucial site where culture and nature intersect. The dancing body provides a kind of living laboratory for examining the production of the body: its training, its image, its story, and its ways of creating the world around it.


28. Kristeva, Revolution, 29. It should be noted that the semiotic realm is not a "feminine" one. The chora corresponds to the pre-Oedipal realm, and the symbolic to the emergence into language. The chora, therefore, cannot be coded as "feminine," because sexual difference does not exist in the pre-Oedipal realm. Kristeva is a staunch anti-essentialist whose idea of the "feminine" is one of position (which is relative) rather than of essence. In fact, those figures whom she cites as exemplary writers of the semiotic (e.g., Artaud, Mallarmé) are men.

29. Kristeva, Revolution, 105.

30. Kristeva's theory of the chora is rooted in psychoanalytic theory; the contours of the semiotic and the symbolic are modeled on Lacan's scheme of the imaginary and the symbolic. (Since the publication of Revolution in Poetic Language, Kristeva has become a psychoanalyst, and her writings have intensified in that direction.) The problematic question of how her theory of the chora serves both to affirm and to marginalize the nonverbal is extremely complex and beyond the scope of this essay.


32. Kristeva, "Gesture."

33. Kristeva, "System."

34. Kristeva, "Gesture."


36. The analysis of Duncan's reviews in this article is based on the extensive collection of clippings in the Isadora Duncan Reserve Dance Clipping File at the New York Public Library Dance Collection, New York City, as well as those from other archival and library collections across the country.


42. There were a few exceptions, notably her 1908 Frohman-produced run at the Criterion Theatre in New York City. At this point, she was in urgent need of money for her school.

43. See Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 175. Langer asserts that virtual gesture is the essential sign of dance:

The primary illusion of dance is a virtual realm of Power—not actual, physically exerted power, but appearances of influence and agency created by virtual gesture.

In watching a collective dance—say, an artistically successful ballet—one does not see people running around; one sees the dance driving this way, drawn that way, gathering here, spreading there—fleeing, resting, rising, and so forth, and all the motion seems to spring from powers beyond the performers. (175)
Duncan is an embodiment of this principle. Ironically, due to the prevalent modern dance bias against Duncan at the time Langer wrote this passage (Graham and Humphrey and others wanted to distinguish their formalism against what they claimed was Duncan's self-indulgence), she used Duncan as a negative example of the misguided idea that dance is essentially a handmaiden to music.


45. Besides Duncan's genius as a performer was her genius as a choreographer. She created that feeling of spontaneity through precisely calculated means. Her technique, while it appeared easy, was actually a physically strenuous and performatively sophisticated one, requiring years' work to perfect.

46. H. T. Parker, Motion Arrested: Dance Reviews of H. T. Parker, ed. Olive Holmes (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), 59.


50. An extensive variety of these manuals, consulted in research for this essay, are at the Library of Congress.


52. O'Sheel, "Isadora Duncan," 481.

GENDER ISSUES IN DANCE HISTORY PEDAGOGY

I would like to acknowledge the University of Texas dance majors and Marilla Srinicki, of the UT Center for Teaching Effectiveness, for their considerable contributions to this article.


"WOMAN," WOMEN, AND SUBVERSION: SOME NAGGING QUESTIONS FROM A DANCE HISTORIAN

1. This paper was delivered as a keynote address to the 1994 annual conference of the Congress on Research in Dance. As a keynote address, it was written specifically for oral delivery. Rather than rewrite the paper, I have chosen to retain its original style.


5. See Ann Daly, Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).


TRENDS IN DANCE SCHOLARSHIP: FEMINIST THEORY ACROSS THE MILLENNIAL DIVIDE


5. See Ann Daly, Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).