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## **Class Act: Negotiating Art and Market in the Career of Isadora Duncan**

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Class Act: Negotiating Art and Market in the Career of Isadora Duncan

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty  
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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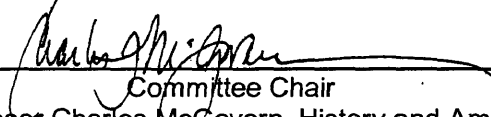
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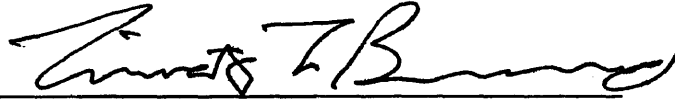
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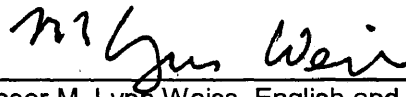
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## ABSTRACT PAGE

This thesis attempts to resolve revolutionary and reactionary themes of gender and race in the life of Isadora Duncan by exploring her life and work from an economic perspective. Specifically, it argues that Isadora Duncan's life can best be understood as a negotiation of art and market. Through her dance, her schools, and her autobiography, Duncan simultaneously reflected and reacted against the market challenges facing women and artists during the decades surrounding the twentieth century. After turning to teaching and performing dance to earn a livelihood and find an audience, Duncan spent much of the rest of her life reinventing herself as removed from financial and commercial considerations by emphasizing the historical legacy of her art, creating not-for-profit schools, and articulating the failure of capitalism for art and artists.

Chapter 1 explores the ways Isadora Duncan drew from aesthetic and Hellenist models and ideals to establish herself as a professional artist removed from market considerations, even as she participated in the growing consumer culture as both consumer and object of consumption. Chapter 2 argues that through the process of establishing and securing funding for her schools, she recast her dance as for the "masses" to further downplay her dependence on the market, although her democratic ambitions were undercut by her racial rhetoric and bourgeois aspirations. Finally, Chapter 3 identifies the ways she used her autobiography -- written in part out of financial necessity -- to demonstrate her frustration with the capitalist world and justify her eventual move to Soviet Russia.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	ii
Introduction .....	1
Chapter One: Art and Commodity: The Problem of the “Wage-Earning Woman” .....	12
Chapter Two: Redefining the Market: A School and Dance for the Masses .....	32
Chapter Three: Toward a “New World”: The Struggle of Art against Capitalism in <i>My Life</i> .....	56
Conclusion .....	77
Bibliography .....	82

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## Introduction

Interpretations of the life and work of dancer Isadora Duncan range from laudatory to sycophantic to dismissive. As Maureen Needham wrote in *Dance Chronicle*, “Writers cannot decide who she was: reformer? forerunner? revolutionary? decidedly *non-modern*? apotheosis of the Romantic myth? feminist? simply an amateur?”<sup>1</sup> Part of the challenge of pinpointing Duncan’s significance is that she herself flitted across many worlds: raised in San Francisco, traveling across the country to Chicago and New York to seek engagements, touring Europe and the United States, moving to communist Russia, and returning to France a few years before her notorious death. She forged relationships with visual and theater artists – including Edward Gordon Craig, Auguste Rodin, and Constantin Stanislavsky – who saw in her the embodiment of the ideals they sought to achieve in their respective disciplines. She mingled with the likes of Gertrude Stein and Jean Cocteau in salons on both sides of the Atlantic and hobnobbed with the wealthy during her courtship with Paris Singer, son of sewing machine innovator Isaac Singer, and when she resided at the expensive Hotel Negresco in Nice. But she also spurned the Western world and its wealth by accepting an offer in 1921 to open a school in Soviet Russia.

It’s difficult to find the common thread running throughout her multi-faceted life, which spanned an equally diverse period from the Gilded Age through World War I to the Jazz Age. Her life and work have been explored from many angles. While some scholars have studied the musical, religious, and somatic foundations of her dance, most have interpreted her life and writing – in particular her autobiography, *My Life* – primarily from sociopolitical and socio-cultural standpoints. Until recently Duncan was frequently cast as a revolutionary whose corset-free garments, philosophies on movement and education, and free-spirited persona contributed to dress reform, innovated dance, and conveyed an image of an autonomous, liberated, modern

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<sup>1</sup> Maureen Needham, “Review – Who Is Isadora?” *Dance Chronicle* 19, no. 3 (1996): 332.



woman. Subsequent scholarship has suggested that her ideas about dance, women's rights, and children's education were exclusionary in their focus on white women, and her tactics – reactionary rather than revolutionary – both contributed to and reflected her lessening popularity and relevance by the end of her life.

In this thesis, I will not argue Isadora Duncan as purely revolutionary or purely reactionary but will instead place these tensions regarding gender and race in an economic context by exploring the financial motivations and market challenges that continually motivated her artistic ventures at the same time they threatened to undermine them. I will argue that Isadora Duncan's life and work can best be understood as a simultaneous reflection of and reaction to the economic challenges facing women and artists during the decades surrounding the start of the twentieth century. After turning to teaching and performing dance to earn a livelihood and find an audience, Duncan spent much of the rest of her life reinventing herself as removed from financial and commercial considerations by emphasizing the historical legacy of her art, creating not-for-profit schools, and articulating the failure of capitalism for art and artists.

Isadora Duncan's artistic and historical reputation has changed considerably over time, as contemporary writers and scholars have positioned her within heroic, social, feminist, and modernist frameworks. In the years following her dramatic death, she was remembered by many artists and intellectuals as a heroic individual, a great artist who revolutionized dance by linking it to classical traditions and endowing it with expressive possibilities. Mary Fanton Roberts recalled sculptor George Gray Barnard's words: "Isadora Duncan holds within her genius an art to open untold dreams of man; no greater art has existed in any age."<sup>2</sup> Max Eastman similarly wrote that she "completely captured the artistic world" and "rode the wave of revolt against Puritanism."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Fanton Roberts, "Isadora: My Friend" in *The Art of the Dance*, edited by Sheldon Cheney (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1928), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Max Eastman, *Heroes I Have Known: Twelve Who Lives Great Lives* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1942), 86.

Yet Eastman acknowledged that admiration for her was not universal. He wrote, “A lot of stupid Americans – indeed almost all of stupid America – imagined that they laughed at Isadora. They are completely mistaken. Isadora laughed at them.”<sup>4</sup> Shaemus O’Sheel similarly acknowledged that popular opinion, especially in the United States, focused on her tabloid personality: “our awareness of her as an artist was clouded by our interest in her as good copy for sensational stories in the public prints.”<sup>5</sup>

Although many writers and radicals extolled her for her genius, others cast the impact of her contributions as tempered by her female qualities. In 1929, William Bolitho wrote that “she, above all women of our time, in scale, in courage, in the spirit, made the purest attempt at the life of adventure.”<sup>6</sup> But he asserted that her insistence on the naturalness of her movement compromised her artistic integrity. Civilization, he argued, not nature, produced great art: “A woman, any woman, beside a fawn, says Shopenhauer, is grotesque. But let Michel Angelo [sic] dress her, put her in silk, put shoes on those feet, and the fawn may come and lick her hand . . . This is the function of art: to make a supernatural world; not to imitate the natural.”<sup>7</sup> It was not only her exterior appearance that undermined her cause. Mark Franko has noted that radicals in the 1920s and 1930s felt that women – especially modern dancers – lacked the rationality of their male counterparts: she “was a Red, but not a real Revolutionist,” *New Masses* editor Michael Gold wrote in March of 1929, “it was all emotion with her.”<sup>8</sup>

Although interest in Duncan waned in the middle of the century, the image of her as an exceptional, if not slightly eccentric, woman endured into the 1970s, when renewed attention to

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<sup>4</sup> Max Eastman, “Isadora Duncan Is Dead” in *The Art of the Dance*, 37.

<sup>5</sup> Shaemus O’Sheel, “Isadora Duncan, Artist” in *The Art of the Dance*, 31.

<sup>6</sup> William Bolitho, *Twelve Against the Gods: The Story of Adventure* (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Company, 1941), 307-308.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Franko, *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 46.

her focused in part on her as a radical and an early celebrity.<sup>9</sup> In addition, scholars investigating the origins of modern dance began to locate Duncan more specifically within the context of early feminism. Joseph Mazo contrasted female ballet dancers, who danced under the direction of male ballet masters and choreographers, with Duncan and her contemporaries: “The first artists of American modern dance were feminists in that they believed themselves to be independent, capable, functioning human beings.”<sup>10</sup> Modern dance proved itself to be a site for the New Woman not only because it offered an alternative to the patriarchal models of ballet and other stage dance but also because of its representation of and reliance upon larger cultural and societal trends. Elizabeth Kendall has argued that the early modern dancer became “a prime symbol of the Modern American Woman” because modern dancers synthesized the physical and the artistic – “two realms where American women’s new capacities for self-expression were exercised.”<sup>11</sup>

In exploring how Duncan acted out these new expressive capacities, scholars have called attention to Duncan’s indebtedness to a number of movements popular among turn-of-the-century middle-class women. In particular scholars have noted her connection to the ideas of François Delsarte, a French vocal coach who advocated an interrelationship between movement and expression. Scholars have traced the roots of Duncan’s “Greek” dance in Delsartean ideals as propagated in the United States by actor Steele MacKaye and elocution expert Genevieve

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<sup>9</sup> Critic Richard Kimball wrote in the January 13, 1978, *New York Post*: “One striking reason for the Duncan revival is the almost insatiable yearning today for stars, . . . charismatic leaders who can serve as role models in the struggle for reassertion of the individual in an increasingly homogenized society. Isadora is correctly perceived as an individual.” (Fredrika Blair, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), xii) Franklin Rosemont wrote in the preface to *Isadora Speaks*, “Her radicalism, notorious in her own time but often ridiculed by her detractors and later played down by some of her more timid admirers, especially in the U.S., is increasingly recognized as an important and even decisive element in her world-view, and by no means irrelevant to her dance.” (Franklin Rosemont, editor, *Isadora Speaks: Writing and Speeches of Isadora Duncan* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1981), ii)

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Mazo, *Prime Movers: The Makers of Modern Dance in America*, Second Edition (New York: Morrow, 2000), 13 and 16.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Kendall, *Where She Danced* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 8.

Stebbins: the benefits of physical culture, the natural as superior to the artificial, the physical as related to the spiritual, classical culture as a model and an ideal for art, and movement as a subject for analysis.<sup>12</sup> Duncan embraced as well the Delsartean conceit that clothing should not be restrictive, an idea endorsed by advocates of physical culture and dress reform. Scholars have argued that by adopting the progressive attitudes of Delsarte and leveraging the associated Hellenistic ideals, Duncan helped dance gain acceptance among middle-class Americans.<sup>13</sup>

Drawing upon feminist insights, scholars have interpreted Duncan through the politics of the body, particularly, her artistic agency. They have argued that she developed her art purposefully and with keen insight into the limitations placed on her by a society that questioned the authority of women, found the body problematic, and created dualisms that positioned women against men, nature against civilization, the physical against the intellectual, and the West against the exotic other. Penelope Farfan has argued that by “stress[ing] equally the observation of the movements of nature and the study of great works,” Duncan aligned nature with classical culture and other arts to insist upon a place for “nature” in culture and for “natural” dance among the arts.<sup>14</sup> Alice Bloch similarly has claimed that by leveraging ideas about the ancient and natural and focusing on the solar plexus as opposed to the legs and lower body – areas associated with the sexual, primitive, and exotic – Duncan created an expressive dance that portrayed her as an individual with “complete control of her mind over her body.” Dance that expressed the intellect contrasted with ballet, which by the end of the nineteenth century had lost much of its expressive elements in favor of technical and sexual displays that were not perceived as artistic.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter, *Reformers and Visionaries: The Americanization of the Art of the Dance* (Brooklyn: Dance Horizons, 1979), 39.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii and 38.

<sup>14</sup> Penelope Farfan, “Between the Acts: Performing and Writing Subjectivity in the Careers of Elizabeth Robins, Isadora Duncan, and Virginia Woolf, 1891-1941.” (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1994), 34.

<sup>15</sup> Alice Bloch, “Isadora Duncan and Vaslav Nijinsky: Dancing on the Brink. An Examination of the Art and Lives of Isadora Duncan and Vaslav Nijinsky as Means of Exploring Dance as

As scholars have continued to explore the body as a site of cultural identity, interpretations of Duncan have focused not just on the ways she represented forward-thinking feminist ideals but also the ways that she reflected the agenda of turn-of-the-century, middle-class white culture. Ann Daly in particular has detailed how Duncan leveraged prevailing cultural and social ideas – including Darwin, Nietzsche, Hellenism, and Delsarte – to create her dancing body as moral, natural, and intellectual. By positioning her body in these ways, Duncan aligned herself and her dance with the ideals of the gatekeepers of legitimate culture. Whereas scholars such as Elizabeth Kendall regard Duncan as a product of Europe, where Duncan spent much of her adult life, Daly focuses on Duncan in the context of American culture, particularly, the distinctions that were being drawn between “high” and “low” culture: “Duncan’s project was not just to produce art but to legitimize dance as a ‘high’ art.”<sup>16</sup>

Daly’s argument hinges on the assertion that “the fundamental strategy of Duncan’s project to gain cultural legitimacy for dancing was one of exclusion.” To establish her art as “high,” Duncan set herself up against not only ballet dancers and other stage performers but also the culture of “African primitives.” Using exclusionary techniques, Duncan created an art that was American, or, more specifically, white: “Duncan manage[d] to insert such a previously marginal practice as dance into the center of a cultural vortex [by] consistently aligning her dancing with upper-class, WASP America.”<sup>17</sup> Carol Martin similarly has placed Duncan in the context of upper- and middle-class whites who used neoclassicism to distance themselves from a “culturally mixed landscape” that included “newly enfranchised African Americans and a growing, diverse yet dominantly European immigrant population.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, as Laura Castor has

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Facilitator and Indicator of the Role of the Body in Cultural Transformation” (Ph.D. dissertation, Temple University, 1991), 185.

<sup>16</sup> Ann Daly, *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), xii.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Carol Martin, “Classical in Difference: Isadora Duncan and Bill T. Jones” in *Gender*

argued, Duncan's struggles, as evidenced in her art and in *My Life*, "mirrored the larger cultural struggles of white Americans in the early twentieth century."<sup>19</sup> Although Duncan "portrayed herself as a Romantic artist and champion of women's emancipation" in *My Life*, this "feminist work was largely on behalf of white women."<sup>20</sup> Linda Tomko also has described Duncan as a reflection of the feminist and nationalistic ideals of the society women who patronized her in their own attempts to serve as arbiters of new "high" cultural practices.<sup>21</sup>

Scholars have continued to explore the antimodern and reactionary elements of Duncan's life by calling attention to the discrepancy between her "radical attempts to create a new public persona for women" and her "reactionary neoclassical ideas."<sup>22</sup> Ann Daly has argued that when Duncan appropriated frontier rhetoric and adopted nativist discourse in the 1920s, the dancer "made explicit what was there all along, underneath the veneer of idyllic Hellenism: the idea of a pure (white), premodern America and herself as the paradigmatic pioneer woman traversing the frontiers of self, art, and nation."<sup>23</sup> Other scholars have documented a shift in Duncan's thinking. Melissa Ragona has argued that initially Duncan "reached to the Nietzschean ecstatic as a way of dismantling nineteenth-century precepts of realism, romanticism, and subjectivity in art," but that by the 1920s, what began as subversive dance fit "regressive State and National ideologies."<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Francis has attributed these defensive tactics to Duncan's anxiety over her loss of

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*Nonconformity, Race, and Sexuality: Charting the Difference*, edited by Toni Lester (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 128.

<sup>19</sup> Laura Castor, "Historical Memory, Autobiography, and Art; Redefining 'Identity' Through the Writing and Theater of Isadora Duncan, Hallie Flanagan, and Lillian Hellman" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1994), 51.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 and 13.

<sup>21</sup> Linda Tomko, *Dancing Class: Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Divides in American Dance, 1890-1920* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1999), 64.

<sup>22</sup> Martin, 129.

<sup>23</sup> Daly, 215.

<sup>24</sup> Melissa Ragona, "Ecstasy, Primitivism, Modernity: Isadora Duncan and Mary Wigman," *American Studies* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 48 and 60.

relevancy in the 1920s, as a new generation came of age and dance forms from African-American traditions increased in popularity. Although Duncan's earlier work had created the modern woman through an "experience of coherence and totality" that united mind and body and nature and civilization, her decreasing relevance in the 1920s caused her to revert to a separation of mind and body and espouse "a divisive rhetoric of race and nation."<sup>25</sup> Francis concludes that far from being an event – a progressive figure advocating a new role for women – by the end of her life, Duncan became a monument, an agent not of change but of nostalgia for an earlier time.<sup>26</sup>

In further revising theories regarding the agency and cultural identity of the performing body, dance scholars have continued to cast Duncan as part of a shift in patriarchal and voyeuristic models. Sally Banes has revised the feminist perspective for dance by arguing that unlike in film, in which women became passive objects of the male gaze, in dance, the performative aspect enabled women to display agency even when the narrative presented subordinated them to men, as in many nineteenth-century ballets. But Banes also argued that in creating images of a woman alone on stage, Duncan and other female solo artists broke from the marriage story put forth by ballet.<sup>27</sup> More recently, Ann Cooper Albright has argued that Duncan escaped the voyeurism of stage performance by employing shifting musicality. This shifting musicality rendered Duncan's dance a two-way process between her and her audience rather than a series of visual poses for her audience's consumption. Because she refused to yield to the binaries that divided dancers bodies' from their selves, Duncan created her body as a site of liberation rather than repression and circumvented racist and misogynistic cultural tendencies that marginalized dancers as only their bodies – and thus as objectified commodities.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Francis, "From Event to Modernism: Modernism, Feminism, and Isadora Duncan," *American Studies* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 28-29 and 26.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Sally Banes, *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stage* (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>28</sup> Ann Albright, *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 5.

Recently, scholars have analyzed Duncan from a modernist perspective, finding intersections between dance and other fields such as literature and film. Amy Koritz has argued that subordination of the performer to the creator/artist in modernist literature and theater proved problematic for solo dancers such as Duncan who were both creators and performers. These solo dancers faced a challenge in elevating their dance to “high” art because they were not able to “remove the dancer from the dance.”<sup>29</sup> Unable to escape personality-centered performance, Duncan and other female solo dancers could not conform to the modernist, aesthetic, and symbolist ideals popular in England. Mark Franko has noted that the predominance of female dancer/choreographers “begs the question of how modern dance found itself allied with modernism at all.” But Franko has found that modern dance used “expressive strategies” to counter the “ideological constraints” of modernism. Franko argues for a revision of the traditional modernist narrative of dance that placed Duncan at the beginning of a progression “from expression as spontaneity to expression as semiological system to the marginalizing of expressive intent.”<sup>30</sup> He writes that Duncan’s early and late works “correspond with a pre-expressive and a post-expressive level”; the subjective, personal emotions on display in her early works were replaced in her later works by a universality more in tune with modernist separation of subjective, personal emotion from universal expression.<sup>31</sup>

Such readings of Duncan share themes with the nineteenth-century distinction between “high” and “low” culture described by Lawrence Levine. Levine has argued that the establishment of “high” culture – in contrast to “low” culture – at the end of the nineteenth century elevated the work and the creator over the performer in the United States: “An art that

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<sup>29</sup> Amy Koritz, *Gendering Bodies/Performing Art: Dance and Literature in Early Twentieth-Century British Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 11.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Franko, *Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), ix.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, x.



remains spiritually pure never becomes secondary to the performer or to the audience.”<sup>32</sup> The works themselves became “finished, unalterable works of art” that were not open to interpretation by performers: “Just as actors were admonished not to take liberties with the text of a Shakespearean play, so singers and soloists were obliged increasingly to stick to the sacred text of the great masters.”<sup>33</sup> Thus scholars exploring both sides of the Atlantic have identified literary and cultural ideals that would have presented challenges to Duncan.

These cultural and literary ideals had market implications. According to Levine, the cultural distinctions made at the turn of the century recast certain arts as the property of a select few who controlled access to and interpretation of these arts. In this way, Shakespeare, opera, art, and music were “‘rescued’ from the marketplace” by an upper-class white audience responding to new economic and social realities.<sup>34</sup> As scholars such as Ann Daly, Carol Martin, and Linda Tomko have asserted that Duncan’s cultural context can be described in racial, ethnic, and class terms, they have placed Duncan within the context of the nationalistic and feminist agendas of upper- and middle-class women asserting themselves through this new high/low divide. Drawing from these conclusions, I am to further explore the complex set of market factors that underlay Duncan’s agenda. Lynn Garafola notes of dance studies in general, “In recent years, class has dropped out of the ‘race, class, and gender’ mantra, now ubiquitous in scholarly parlance . . . The word ‘elitism’ is bandied about, without any real consideration of what it means in a particular circumstance. . . . Like the other arts (indeed, all human activity) dance exists within a network of social and economic relationships.”<sup>35</sup> By exploring Isadora Duncan specifically through her economic relationships, I aim to bring class to the forefront of the analysis of her life to

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<sup>32</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 120.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 95 and 138.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>35</sup> Lynn Garafola, *Legacies of Twentieth-Century Dance* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), viii.

demonstrate that her shifting attitudes throughout her life are united by a complex set of economic and market conditions that both bolstered and threatened her place as an artist.

I will argue that Isadora Duncan's life can best be understood as a negotiation of art and market. In order to negotiate the tension between these two forces, Duncan blurred the boundaries between domesticity and public life, between art and commerce. But these blurred boundaries caused continued problems for her as she tested the categories of large social institutions. In the following chapters, I will explore how Duncan navigated the challenges presented to her by the market in three ways: through her art, through her school, and through her autobiography. The first chapter will look at the ways Duncan maintained respectability and minimized the commercial considerations of her work by casting herself as professional and positioning her dance as art for an emerging set of consumers. The second chapter will explore how Duncan continued to downplay her dependence upon the market by recasting her work for the masses, even as her racial rhetoric and bourgeois aspirations undercut her democratic ambitions. The final chapter will further explore this duality – both relying upon and denying the necessity of the market – by examining the economic tensions and financial motivations driving her autobiography. *My Life* documents Duncan's frustrations with the capitalist and commercial orientations of the Western world and of the United States in particular – frustrations that ultimately motivated her move to Soviet Russia.

“How difficult it is for a woman to have a career!”<sup>36</sup>

## Chapter One

### Art and Commodity: The Problem of the “Wage-Earning Woman”

Isadora Duncan’s lifetime spanned a dynamic time for women in the arts, on stage, and in the professional world. Women were seeking out careers in the arts – performing, decorative, and visual – and contending with backlash against their newfound visibility and economic independence. Like other female artists, Duncan leveraged the capital available to her as a woman to create a profession and support herself financially, but she also tried to deemphasize the economic motivations of her work, as she struggled with the commercial and sexual connotations of earning a living on the stage and using her body as her medium. Coming of age in the 1890s and 1900s, Duncan represented a transition between two trends: a move toward professionalism and economic independence in the 1870s and 1880s and a recasting of women as consumers and commodities in the early 1900s. In this chapter, I will argue that to minimize the commercial associations that threatened to undermine her respectability, Duncan cast her dance as art, but this careful positioning was compromised by her need to earn a living and thus commodify her work. As long as she was an artist, she could be respectably middle class, but as soon as she had to get paid for her art, both her art and her morality became suspect. She removed herself from these contradictions between art and market by presenting herself as a professional artist and by positing her work as an exploration of ancient traditions at a time when such traditions were being reclaimed across the middle class.

Born May 26, 1877, Isadora Duncan was raised with her three siblings in San Francisco and Oakland by her mother, Mary Dora Duncan, a divorcee. The product of a middle-class Irish

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<sup>36</sup> Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (New York: Liveright, 1995), 149.

background, Dora supported her family by teaching music lessons and shared with her children her appreciation for music and literature. The Duncan children in turn taught dance and performed as a small theater troupe in their early years.<sup>37</sup> In 1895, Isadora moved with her mother to Chicago, where after a few small engagements, she secured a place in Augustin Daly's touring theater troupe. She left the troupe after two years to pursue a solo career in New York City, where she gained a reputation as "Society's Favorite Dancer."<sup>38</sup> In May of 1899, Duncan sailed with her family from New York for Europe. She remained based in Europe for most of the rest of her life although she returned to the United States six times to tour and to escape World War I.<sup>39</sup> She lived in Russia from 1921 to 1924 and spent the last two years of her life in France, where she died in a car accident in Nice on September 14, 1927.

Duncan's earliest stops in Europe were in London and Paris, where she studied art, in particular Greek figures in museums such as the British Museum and Louvre, and learned about ancient Greece, the Renaissance, and the Pre-Raphaelites from men such as poet Douglas Ainslie and Charles Halle, director of the New Gallery. As her reputation grew, she successfully toured Hungary, Austria, and Germany, where she explored the philosophies of Kant and Nietzsche, whose writings on both dance and the conflicting life forces of the Apollonian and the Dionysian resonated with her. After a family pilgrimage to Greece in autumn of 1903, Duncan resumed her career performing in Europe. In addition to performing throughout Europe, as well as in the United States, Russia, South America, and North Africa, Duncan opened three schools in her life. From 1905 to 1908, she operated her first school in Grünewald, Germany, which was directed by

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<sup>37</sup> The 1892 Oakland city directory listed "DUNCAN, Miss A. Duncan and Miss May E.," as dancing teachers, and in 1893, all four Duncan children toured the California coast as a theatrical troupe. Doree Duncan, Carol Pratl, and Cynthia Splatt, *Life into Art: Isadora Duncan and Her World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 28-29, and Peter Kurth, *Isadora: A Sensational Life* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), 25-26.

<sup>38</sup> Kurth, 48-49.

<sup>39</sup> Duncan's trips to the United States were in 1908, 1909, 1911, 1915, 1916-1918, and 1922-1923.

her sister Elizabeth while Isadora toured. That school closed due to lack of funds. In 1914, with six of her Grünewald students joining her as instructors, she opened a second school, at Bellevue, a mansion outside Paris. Paris Singer put this mansion at her disposal in hopes of helping her move past her grief from the loss of her two young children (one by Singer and one by Gordon Craig) the previous year. That school closed later in 1914, when World War I broke out. In 1921, Duncan was invited by the Russian commissar for education to open a third school, in Moscow. Although she left Russia in 1924, that school continued to operate into the 1940s.

At the most basic level, Duncan became a dancer to make money. On August 2, 1908, the *San Francisco Call* reported on her early successes in London: “Duncan says she owes her success to the fact that her father, formerly a wealthy banker, was a great student of Greek literature and art. Her training was commenced at the early age of 7 in San Francisco. In later years, when her father failed as a banker . . . she adopted the Greek dance as a means of livelihood.”<sup>40</sup> At a more philosophical level, Duncan became a dancer to achieve independence. At the start of her memoirs, she asserts her intention to be independent instead of reliant upon men’s financial means. She writes that the “practical example” of her parents’ failed marriage led her to strong feelings regarding the “slavish condition of women.” She writes, “I was deeply impressed by the injustice of this state of things for women, and, putting it together with the story of my father and mother, I decided, then and there, that I would live to fight against marriage and for the emancipation of women.”<sup>41</sup> To Duncan the institution of marriage was not merely political. She cast “the slavish condition of women” and “the emancipation of women” in economic terms. Describing her father’s acquisition and loss of four fortunes, she writes, “I am relating something of the history of my father because these early impressions had a tremendous

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<sup>40</sup> *San Francisco Call*, August 2, 1908.

<sup>41</sup> *My Life*, 19.

effect on my after life.”<sup>42</sup> She questioned the economics behind the prevailing view of marriage:

Many women to whom I have preached the doctrine of freedom have weakly replied, “But who is to support the children?” It seems to me that if the marriage ceremony is needed as protection to ensure the enforced support of children, then you are marrying a man who, you suspect, would, under certain conditions, refuse to support his children, and it is a pretty low-down proposition.<sup>43</sup>

These sentiments repeat later in her autobiography in her discussion of the loss of her patronesses during her first pregnancy: “I believe, as a wage-earning woman, that if I make the great sacrifice of strength and health, and even risk my life, to have a child, I should certainly not do so if, on some future occasion, the man can say that the child belongs to him by law, and he will take it away from me and I shall see it only three times a year!”<sup>44</sup> Her view of marriage as antithetical to career was typical of the time. In her study of female professional artists at the end of the nineteenth century, Kirsten Swinth asserts that “choosing not to marry was a common decision for women artists.”<sup>45</sup> Like Duncan, many of these women felt that earning their own livelihood rendered marriage a choice rather than a requirement. In 1885, *Art Interchange* noted, “Of the woman of the future, self-reliant, capable, and financially independent, marriage will be an incident and not a career.”<sup>46</sup>

In becoming a “wage-earning woman,” Duncan followed this trend of middle-class women asserting their financial independence. Women in many different disciplines sought out professional careers and/or economic independence in the nineteenth century. Swinth notes that in the visual arts, for example, “Women entered art in unprecedented numbers after the Civil

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>45</sup> Kirsten Swinth, *Painting Professionals: Women Artists and the Development of Modern American Art, 1870-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 44.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 82.

War, flooding art schools, hanging their pictures alongside men's, pressing for critical recognition, and competing for sales in an unpredictable market."<sup>47</sup> While some women tried to make their way in men's fields – such as literature – others carved out new fields and professions. By looking to arts such as etching, stained glass, pastels, and portraits, for example, “women found marketing openings where competition was less intense and patrons more numerous.”<sup>48</sup> Noting a similar strategy, Judith Lynne Hanna argues that at the turn of the century, “Women created new fields like modern dance, social work, kindergarten teaching, and librarianship rather than compete in men's professions.”<sup>49</sup> Women also proved innovators in fields such as decorative arts, which emerged from the domestic world they already had access to.<sup>50</sup> But these strategies posed challenges because opportunities not embraced by men held potentially less value. Swinth writes, for example, of portraiture, “Despite the promise of reliable income and the rising status of the genre, women also found portraiture risky – risky because, like men, they built their reputations on a genre lower in the hierarchy and risky because, unlike men, they had less opportunity to develop reputations outside portraiture.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, dance's reputation was challenged by its association with “others”: “Females and gays, groups stigmatized in America in the sense that they are subject to prejudice and discrimination, have sought escape from social and economic constraints . . . One option has been to go into dance. Since the French Revolution, dance has been a low-status occupation, not sequestered by the dominant male group.”<sup>52</sup> These groups thus leveraged their association with the body to their economic advantage. W.T. Lhamon notes this strategy among black “others” as well. Of slaves who “shinned it” after they finished

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>49</sup> Judith Lynne Hanna, “Patterns of Dominance: Men, Women, and Homosexuality in Dance,” *The Drama Review: TDR* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 32.

<sup>50</sup> Mary W. Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde's America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), xv.

<sup>51</sup> Swinth, 86.

<sup>52</sup> Hanna, 22-23.

selling their masters' wares at New York's Catherine Market to get money, fish, or eels, Lhamon writes, "To coin these gestures was to produce currency for exchange."<sup>53</sup>

Despite the potential for certain groups to find agency in gestures, dancing for profit was a questionable undertaking for a woman in the nineteenth century. Far from a "high" art, dance by the late nineteenth century was associated with spectacle and sexuality rather than with artistry. Even the ballet had lost some of its cachet despite attempts to cast it as art by pulling storylines from literature and presenting the ballerina as a silent – and thus non-threatening – fairylike figure; Robert Allen writes that "enveloping the ballet in sylvan mists [did not] succeed in completely containing its transgressive potential for long."<sup>54</sup> By about 1860, Alice Bloch asserts, ballet became focused on technical and sexual display.<sup>55</sup> Not only the artistic quality of dance but also the social position of the stage performer was problematic. Being on stage raised associations with other careers involving selling one's body. Robert Allen writes:

[W]ell into the nineteenth century (and, in the case of burlesque, well beyond) both actresses and the theater were strongly associated with prostitution: the step from selling one's body onstage to selling it offstage was seen as a short one by many men . . . By going on stage, an actress not only stepped from the safely contained domestic realm into the topsy-turvy world of theatrical illusion, but she also became part of a commercial exchange by which she sold her "self" for the delectation of male spectators.<sup>56</sup>

To compensate for this anxiety, Allen posits, men relegated performers to a lower-class status.

Without a respectable dance to draw from to legitimize her work, Duncan needed to find other models to frame and legitimize her endeavors. One existing model of respectable, wage-

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<sup>53</sup> W.T. Lhamon, Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performances from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 94.

<sup>55</sup> Bloch, 72.

<sup>56</sup> Allen, 50.



earning women was the model of aesthetic women who had innovated fields such as decorative arts, interior decorating, and fashion. Mary Blanchard argues that the true “visionaries of American aestheticism were women” who explored new identities through aesthetic dress, theatrical performances within their parlors, and the self as an objet d’art. Rather than trying to enter men’s professions, these women sought to professionalize the realms they already had access to: spaces that involved the home and the body. Blanchard writes:

Beauty and art had become justification for full-time occupation and for profits in many fields outside the home. Art was pursued by women in hopes of selling their products. Women asked where their “fancy work” could be marketed, hoping to move beyond provincial markets into urban centers . . . This determined middle-class group who sought to define themselves as serious artists and to legitimate art as a profession challenged Victorian domesticity as early as the 1870s, using the unusual weapon of aesthetic style and the forum of a household art journal.<sup>57</sup>

These middle-class women facilitated their entrance into professionalism and profit-making using tools available to them as women as their “currency for exchange.” By drawing from capital available to them in the middle-class domestic sphere, these women maintained their respectability even as they earned a living.

One of the traditions that Duncan borrowed from the women of the aesthetic movement to legitimize her wage-earning endeavors was fashioning her self as a work of art. Blanchard writes that by the 1890s, “Aesthetic dress as individual theater in the streets was reallocated to professionals. Influenced by the Delsartean method of physical culture, modern dancers such as Ruth St. Denis adopted the flowing costume of the 1870s and 1880s for the stage.”<sup>58</sup> The freely flowing garments that Duncan advocated for herself and her students echoed those worn by a

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<sup>57</sup> Blanchard, 195.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 174.

wide range of intellectuals and artistic dressers in the 1870s and 1880s. These women “created ‘aesthetic’ dress as an individual work of art, analogous to painting a picture.”<sup>59</sup> In this way, Blanchard argues, women altered the established boundaries of men as subjects and women as objects. Through their dress, women made themselves their own subjects: “Women in artistic gowns saw themselves as artistic theater in the streets, as creators of an art form on a par with painting and sculpture. In creating herself as both performing self and individual artwork, the aesthetic woman undermined tradition by transforming the female as artistic object into the female as artistic subject.”<sup>60</sup> Such a strategy of creating herself as subject rather than object would have helped Duncan avoid some of the scopic problems involved with being a woman on stage.

Following the example of aesthetic women, Duncan also turned her studios and other living quarters into artistic spaces – taking out extraneous furnishings, draping the space and the furniture, and performing in them. Irma Duncan recalled that Isadora “had a knack for transforming a banal hotel room with a few deft touches here and there, using a Spanish shawl or an embroidered cloth to hide some ugly piece of furniture; creating an attractive, personal atmosphere.”<sup>61</sup> Maurice Dumesnil similarly recounted that on the ship that took them to their South American tour, “She asked her newly engaged French maid to unpack the trunk containing various rugs, shawls and scarfs, with which she improvised a tasteful decoration in order to remove the anonymous appearance of the cabin and to give it a personal touch of homelike atmosphere. She was very clever at that, and in a few minutes succeeded in transforming it into a kind of artistic cosy-corner.”<sup>62</sup> Kristin Hoganson has explored such “cosy-corners” as ways

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<sup>59</sup> Mary W. Blanchard, “Boundaries and the Victorian Body,” *American Historical Review*, February 1995 (electronic): 22-23.

<sup>60</sup> Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde’s America*, 138.

<sup>61</sup> Irma Duncan, *Duncan Dancer: An Autobiography* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1965), 158.

<sup>62</sup> Maurice Dumesnil, *An Amazing Journey: Isadora Duncan in South America* (New York: Ives Washburn, 1932), 69.

middle-class American women conveyed their sophistication by emulating the Orientalist decorating trends emerging from Europe.<sup>63</sup> Duncan's transformation of her living space also had precedent in the aesthetic movement, in which domestic space was transformed "into an artistic, theatrical environment."<sup>64</sup> Her staging methods took a cue from what Mary Blanchard describes as "the model of the artist's studio, a theatrical boutique, a space used to market both the celebrity of the artist and the paintings on display."<sup>65</sup> Aesthetes tried to emulate these artists' studios in their houses: "A vogue in popular decorating known as 'studio effects' accented the artistic, theatrical quality of the middle-class interior."<sup>66</sup>

Duncan's references to such artistic styling of her dress and space would have appealed to a specific audience. Artistic and aesthetic women had been "creating and wearing garments perceived by them (and by taste makers) as the 'high' art of the male painter."<sup>67</sup> Such "taste makers" included the society women who patronized Duncan in her early career. Their interest in modern dance relied in part on their familiarity with the Delsarte system. Ann Daly writes that Henrietta Russell, known as the "High Priestess of Delsarte," "brought Delsartism to the Four Hundred in Newport in summer 1891 . . . Twice a week the likes of Mrs. W.C. Whitney, Mrs. William Astor, and Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish met to 'writh, wriggle, bend and sway . . .' an experiment that, in effect, prepared them for the appearance of the young Duncan seven years later."<sup>68</sup> Linda Tomko argues that Delsartean ideals appealed specifically to this upper- and middle-class female audience:

The Delsarte system was suited to practitioners not striving in the front lines of

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<sup>63</sup> Kristin Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 54.

<sup>64</sup> Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde's America*, 143.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-114.

<sup>67</sup> Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body," 22-23.

<sup>68</sup> Daly, 128.

entrepreneurship and economic competition. It was to upper- and middle-class white women, for whom the ideology of separate spheres prescribed a distinct realm of female action, that [Genevieve] Stebbins provided paid instruction in a private and domestic setting, or at young ladies' academies. Relaxed, harmonious bodies, it would seem, could be constructed most readily by those who possessed economic and demographic security.<sup>69</sup>

The prevalence of Delsarte among upper- and middle-class women was evident in the fact that in the 1890s, when Duncan was just starting her career, "A solitary woman in a Greek gown was becoming an obsessive image in those years, on both amateur and professional stages."<sup>70</sup>

In donning draped garments, Duncan followed the example set not only by proponents of Delsarte such as Russell and Stebbins but also of Loie Fuller, another female dancer who had begun making an impact on serious concert dance shortly before Duncan embarked on her own career. Gen Doy writes that Loie Fuller's "use of drapery to elevate her clothed body from dance to high art is important" because "it mobilizes connotations of high art and ideal physical grace and nobility and the modern female body."<sup>71</sup> Duncan's draped garments thus invited similar connotations of "high culture, civilization, and elite values."<sup>72</sup> She reinforced these visual allusions by articulating the alignment of her art with other high arts, in particular sculpture: "The dance and sculpture are the two arts most closely united, and the foundation of both is Nature. The sculptor and the dancer both have to seek in Nature the most beautiful forms."<sup>73</sup> Audiences recognized her allusions. On December 14, 1904, St. Petersburg theater critic Nicolai Georgievich Shebuyev wrote in the *Peterburgskaya Gazeta*, "Duncan has no ballet technique; she

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<sup>69</sup> Tomko, 19-20.

<sup>70</sup> Kendall, 30.

<sup>71</sup> Gen Doy, *Drapery: Classicism and Barbarism in Visual Culture* (London: B. Tauris, 2002), 54.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>73</sup> Isadora Duncan, "What Dancing Should Be" in *The Art of the Dance*, 72.

does not aim at *fouettes* and *cabrioles*. But there is so much sculpture in her.”<sup>74</sup> A reviewer wrote in *The New Age* that it was clear Duncan was more serious than her modern dance rival Maud Allan because Allan dressed in “a picture hat, a Paris gown, and a parasol. [This] is not irrelevant, for it marks the distinction between a religion and a trade.”<sup>75</sup>

This distinction between trade and religion can be traced in part to the late nineteenth-century sacralization of “high art” described by Lawrence Levine. Levine argues that America’s accepted demarcations of high and low culture are not fixed concepts but instead values created to reinforce social hierarchy and authority at a time of social and economic change in the nineteenth century. What was “high” culture became distinct from what was “popular” culture, from the lower order. In 1901, four years before she established her first school in Grönewald, Germany, Duncan announced: “When I am rich I shall rebuild the Temple of Paestum and open a college of priestesses, a school of the dance. I shall teach an army of young girls who will renounce as I have done, every other sensation, every other career. The dance is a religion and should have its worshippers.”<sup>76</sup> In using religious language, Duncan aligned herself with “high” culture and distinguished her art from commercial outputs. In her 1903 speech, “Dance of the Future,” she reaffirmed this sentiment by saying, “For art which is not religious is not art, is mere merchandise.”<sup>77</sup> By invoking high-culture discourse, Duncan resisted interpretations of her as a commodity and positioned herself against popular and commercial culture.

Her high-culture aspirations were evident not only in her words but also in her actions. Another way Duncan sought to legitimize her work as “high” was by authorizing her career in Europe. She later explained, “Under the influence of the books I had read I planned to leave San

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<sup>74</sup> Francis Steegmuller, editor. *Your Isadora: The Love Story of Isadora Duncan and Gordon Craig* (New York: Random House, 1974), 44.

<sup>75</sup> Koritz, 45.

<sup>76</sup> *New York Journal & Advertiser*, June 8, 1901. Allan Ross Macdougall, *Isadora: A Revolutionary in Art and Love* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1960), 61.

<sup>77</sup> Isadora Duncan, “The Art of the Dance” in *The Art of the Dance*, 62.

Francisco and go abroad.”<sup>78</sup> She described the artistic world she had hoped to find in Europe when she left New York: “I dreamed of London, and the writers and painters one might meet there – George Meredith, Henry James, Watts, Swinburne, Burne-Jones, Whistler . . . These were magic names, and, to speak the truth, in all my experience of New York, I had found no intelligent sympathy for my work.”<sup>79</sup> Her interest in going to Europe reflected a common idea of the time of Europe as a place to establish oneself professionally. Paul Fisher writes that for American artists and writers abroad between 1865 and 1920, Europe was “preeminently an initiatory ground for art careers.”<sup>80</sup> Swinth similarly writes that “By the late 1870s, American artists believed that Parisian instruction completed an artist’s training.”<sup>81</sup> Both Fisher and Swinth note the importance of Europe as a proving ground for women and other “others” seeking to legitimize themselves. Swinth writes that traveling to Europe held significance for women seeking professional validation because such travel separated them from their families – thus underscoring these women’s prioritization of career over traditional female obligations – and because it gave them a competitive advantage when they returned to the United States.<sup>82</sup>

But unlike women trying to gain a foothold in careers such as painting or writing, which already held high-culture associations, Duncan needed to establish not only herself as a professional but also her profession as an art. In 1905, she wrote, “Before woman can reach high things in the art of the dance, dancing must exist as an art for her to practice, which at the present day in our country it certainly does not.”<sup>83</sup> She sought to elevate dance above popular culture and commercial connotations by using allusions to history. Hellenism and Greek art became the key

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<sup>78</sup> *My Life*, 24.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>80</sup> Paul Fisher, *Artful Itineraries: European Art and American Careers in High Culture, 1865-1920* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000), xxii.

<sup>81</sup> Swinth, 37 and 39.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>83</sup> Isadora Duncan, “The Dancer and Nature” in *The Art of the Dance*, 68.

to this elevation. She announced that “the dance of the future will have to become a high religious art as it was with the Greeks.”<sup>84</sup> She later explained the sources of her dance: “In my youth, I spent long hours of enthusiastic admiration before the Parthenon, before the friezes, the frescos, the vases, the Tanagra figures.”<sup>85</sup> Her Hellenic references were marketed to and recognized by her public. When she returned from Europe for her first American tour, producer Charles Frohman billed her as “the Rage of London: Miss Isadora Duncan in Her Celebrated Classical Dances.”<sup>86</sup> Other papers also referred to “Greek dances” and “Classical dances.”<sup>87</sup> On February 25, 1903, *San Francisco Examiner* related Duncan’s European successes to her classicism:

It is not in the rapidly whirling skirts of a fandango or the sand-scattering buck-and-wing dance . . . that Miss Duncan has made her great hit. Berlin could not afford to risk her staid reputation on anything so frivolous. Nothing less than Greek dances, Roman posturing and the most classic of gyrations satisfy the endeavors of Miss Duncan, and whether or not the archeologists would admit the correctness of her dancing and her costumes, she has pleased the crowds immensely and her success is beyond question.<sup>88</sup>

The artistic implication of classical culture was clear. Ann Daly argues, “By invoking ‘Greece’ in her dancing, her flowery prose, and her lifestyle, Duncan displayed signs of education and refinement. The Hellenist practices also presupposed a certain class of spectator: not the likes of the *Variety* reviewer who mocked the artistic pretension of the ‘celebrated classical dances,’ but rather an educated viewer reared on classical literature and philosophy.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>85</sup> From a letter published in the *Progres d’Athenes* in 1920. *The Art of the Dance*, 140.

<sup>86</sup> Kurth, 231.

<sup>87</sup> For example, an August 16, 1908, *San Francisco Call* headline read “California Girl Will Furnish Ensure Entertainment with Greek Dancing” and the November 11, 1911, *San Francisco Call* stated “Miss Isadora Duncan . . . will give classical dances at the Columbia Theater.”

<sup>88</sup> Kurth, 102.

<sup>89</sup> Daly, 112.

Although she emphasized the study of Greece to legitimize her endeavors, Duncan explained that her goal was not to recreate Greek dances; it was to find a model for natural, artistic movement. She wrote, “in my art I have not at all copied, as is believed, figures from Greek vases, friezes or paintings. I have learned from them how to study Nature, and when certain of my movements recall gestures seen on the works of art, it is only because they likewise are taken from the great natural source.”<sup>90</sup> She was careful not to trivialize her use of natural movement: “That is not saying that it is enough just to wave the arms and legs, in order to have a natural dance . . . Since I was a child I have spent twenty years of incessant labor in the service of my art, a large part of that time being devoted to technical training – which I am sometimes accused of lacking. That is because, I repeat, technique is not an end but only a means.”<sup>91</sup> The assertion that she trained reinforces her place in the high-art professions. As Lawrence Levine shows, the establishment of the high culture/low culture division relied in part on distinguishing between the amateur and the professional. By the end of the nineteenth century, “More and more it was asserted that it was only the highly trained professional who had the knowledge, skill, and the will to understand and carry out the intentions of the creators of the divine art.”<sup>92</sup> Duncan’s alignment of “labor” with “art” spoke to the seriousness of her purpose (she was not an unpracticed dilettante), but it also allowed her to retain respectability (although she labored, she labored for a higher cause).

Duncan’s emphasis on the natural and her designation of technique as a means rather than an end also cast her dance in opposition to the technique-driven ballet. She described balletic movement as “the result of an articulated puppet” and wrote that it “produces artificial mechanical movement not worthy of the soul.”<sup>93</sup> It was not only ballet she condemned; she also

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<sup>90</sup> Isadora Duncan, “The Great Source” in *The Art of the Dance*, 102.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>92</sup> Levine, 139.

<sup>93</sup> *My Life*, 58.



spoke out against “modern” dances such as the Charleston: “Our modern dances know nothing of this first law of harmony. Their movements are choppy, end-stopped, abrupt . . . Deep emotion, spiritual gravity, are eternally lacking. We dance with the jerky gestures of puppets.”<sup>94</sup> These arguments against ballet and “modern” dances reflect her critique of larger societal institutions. Her disdain for machinery and puppetry (as represented by ballet and “modern” dances) echoed turn-of-the-century concerns about industrial and commercial practices that effaced individual, original art. Blanchard writes of Henry James, “Commodity fetishism was, to James . . . an antidote to both nineteenth-century self-restraint and a capitalist culture with, in James’s words, its ‘army of puppets,’ manipulated by the ‘master-spirits of management.’”<sup>95</sup> James’ and Duncan’s aversions to puppetry and manipulations express their displeasures with the modern capitalist system.

In finding a natural dance through study of Greece, Duncan thus attached herself to the antimodern impulses of the turn of the century. T.J. Jackson Lears argues that Americans who were threatened by advent of the mechanical age and a capitalist economy in which they felt they were losing their autonomy embraced antimodernism at the turn of the century to counter their feeling of overcivilization; “these disparate pilgrims sought ‘authentic’ alternatives to the apparent unreality of modern existence.”<sup>96</sup> Kristin Hoganson writes that “Western commercialism had turned the workman into” what *House Beautiful* in August of 1897 called “a mere living machine, a human automaton.”<sup>97</sup> Duncan acknowledged the labor of her work, but she refused to subjugate it to the capitalist puppet master. Alexandre Benois recalled her comments at a dinner party: “With few exceptions, the ballet, viewed as a whole, represents . . . some sort of

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<sup>94</sup> Isadora Duncan, “Depth” in *The Art of the Dance*, 100.

<sup>95</sup> Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde’s America*, 236-237.

<sup>96</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 5.

<sup>97</sup> Hoganson, 37.

complicated and excruciating mechanism. There is no human dignity to the ballet. The dancers are mere puppets in motion, not people.”<sup>98</sup> Thus Duncan’s dance presented one escape from the mechanical realities of turn-of-the-century industrialization; Felicia McCarren writes, “Isadora’s dancer of the future – with the highest intelligence in the freest body . . . is an alternative ideal to the automaton.”<sup>99</sup>

These antimodern trends influenced not only Duncan’s work but also her audience. When men reasserted themselves as the dominant artisans in the early twentieth century, “women were now highlighted as society figures.”<sup>100</sup> As noted earlier, the emergence of this class of taste makers provided the audience for Duncan’s earliest performances in the homes of wealthy society women in Newport and New York. According to Walter Terry, in 1898, “Isadora was considered something of a vogue at society events sponsored by such social leaders as Mrs. Whitelaw Reid (wife of the publisher of the *New York Tribune*), a Vanderbilt, an Oelrichs, and a Fish.”<sup>101</sup> Indeed, the *New York Herald* wrote on February 20, 1898, “Miss Duncan is a professional entertainer, and she has been taken up extensively by well known society women.”<sup>102</sup> Linda Tomko argues that Duncan and her contemporaries Ruth St. Denis and Loie Fuller represented autonomous women not only through the images they presented on stage but also through their reflections of larger trends among these society patronesses, who sought to establish their own cultural authority by furthering the careers of solo dancers such as Duncan: “Confirming and contesting class leadership through the conduct of high-profile sociability, Duncan’s female Society patrons

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<sup>98</sup> Steegmuller, 47.

<sup>99</sup> Felicia McCarren, *Dancing Machines: Choreographers of the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 36.

<sup>100</sup> Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde’s America*, 230.

<sup>101</sup> Walter Terry, *Isadora Duncan: Her Life, Her Art, Her Legacy* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1963), 15.

<sup>102</sup> *New York Herald* (February 20, 1898), Isadora Duncan Collection, San Francisco Performing Arts Library and Museum.

expanded their performance of women's gender role to include cultural arbitrage."<sup>103</sup>

Duncan's artistic staging methods mentioned earlier created settings appropriate to appeal to this class of women attempting to assert themselves. Her "cosy-corners" and Chinese embroideries, as depicted by newspapers and her acquaintances, demonstrated her participation in the "consumers' imperium" described by Kristin Hoganson. Whereas Blanchard considers the ways household arts emerged from the domestic sphere as tools for professionalism, Hoganson explores the ways global influences entered the home: "American housewives decorated their living rooms in Orientalist fashions because Europeans did so. Copying European styles provided opportunities to experience empire secondhand."<sup>104</sup> Women's consumption of non-Western culture reinforced their place in the dominant culture despite the generally dependent position of their gender in the domestic sphere: "Cosy corners . . . revealed a desire to enjoy the satisfactions of the ruling class in an imperial world order."<sup>105</sup> This consumption reflected a circumnavigation of the traditional public/private divide: "Though members of the subordinate sex at home, they could claim affiliation with a dominant race, nation, and civilization."<sup>106</sup> Linda Tomko similarly posits that through their patronage of modern dance, society women participated in a "complicated negotiation of the public and private spaces assigned them by separate spheres ideology."<sup>107</sup> Tomko writes: "As patrons of Isadora Duncan, Society women combined consumption and home entertaining – indisputable provinces of women's sphere – with setting standards for aesthetic taste."<sup>108</sup> Through practices such as creating her "cosy corners," Duncan not only acted as a consumer, but she also positioned herself for consumption.

Duncan's art could be consumed by society women not only when she performed in their

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<sup>103</sup> Tomko, 64.

<sup>104</sup> Hoganson, 9.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Tomko, 64.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

homes but also when they read about her work abroad. Ann Daly writes that “the dancer’s ‘audience’ extended beyond those who actually saw her dance. In fact, she did not tour beyond major cities of the Northeast very often. Only once, for example, did she return to California. But from her first successes in Paris, in 1901, she was reported on in the American press. Her ideas, her life, her photograph, if not her dancing, were made available.”<sup>109</sup> Duncan carefully created the settings in which she performed and welcomed the public via the press. On January 20, 1923, the *New York Tribune* described one such setting: “Chinese embroideries were strung across the bed on which ISADORA DUNCAN, in a clinging drapery shot with gold thread, reclined. The lights were veiled and there was a softness and quiet in the room.”<sup>110</sup> Such exotic depictions of Duncan in the press would have appealed to women who used not only Orientalist decorating but also fashion and armchair travel to consume foreign culture in their domestic spaces. Their consumption reinforced their overall privileged position, even as they did not have direct economic or political power.<sup>111</sup> But their role was not inconsequential; they “were charged with responsibility for homemaking, inculcating patriotism in their children, and perpetuating the race.”<sup>112</sup> Beyond her exotic settings, Duncan also offered dances that had been legitimated by European audiences and that claimed a classical heritage. A May 3, 1909, *San Francisco Call* article with the headline “Isadora Duncan’s Art Is Termed Message to the World,” expressed the concern that the average number of children had dropped from eight to two, except among the poor.<sup>113</sup> Such dances and the messages attached to them appealed to women responsible for “perpetuating the race.”

This consumers’ imperium was one aspect of what William Leach argues was an overall

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<sup>109</sup> Daly, 19.

<sup>110</sup> Gordon McVay, *Isadora & Esenin* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1980), 135.

<sup>111</sup> Hoganson, 12.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>113</sup> *San Francisco Call*, January 22, 1909.

“transformation of American society into a society preoccupied with consumption” from the 1890s on.<sup>114</sup> The effect of this transformation, according to Leach, was to produce “a secular business and market-oriented culture, with the exchange and circulation of money and goods at the foundation of its aesthetic life and of its moral sensibility.”<sup>115</sup> The woman as the consumer could be an empowering image, and certain women emerged as leaders. In casting her work as art and appealing to an upper- and middle-class consumer through the use of Delsartean ideals, Duncan benefitted from this new position of women as consumers and followed a marketing model successfully set in the aesthetic movement at the turn of the century: “Even literary figures saw aestheticism as a marketing tool, a way to create themselves as elite commodities in a mass-produced culture.”<sup>116</sup> Blanchard writes that Henry James, for example, “distanced himself from the satirical aspects of the popular aesthetic vogue . . . formulating the conception of the novelist as an elite aesthete/commodity to be sold to an ‘up-scale’ modern audience.”<sup>117</sup> Duncan similarly appealed to an upscale audience: “Duncan’s link with Greek Culture found believers among the wealthy, educated class of white Americans who could afford to see her at the opera houses or concert halls – a class deeply invested in the establishment of a national cultural identity.”<sup>118</sup> By commodifying herself for this new set of consumers – upper- and middle-class women – Duncan could appear on stage without some of the commercial and sexual ramifications other dancing women experienced. By legitimizing her art first for a wealthy, white, female audience, Duncan could maintain her claim of respectability.

As Isadora Duncan sought to create dance as a new art, she faced the challenge that she

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<sup>114</sup> William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), xiii.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>116</sup> Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde’s America*, 236.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 236-237.

<sup>118</sup> Ann Daly, “Isadora Duncan and the Distinction of Dance,” *American Studies* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 17.

needed to earn a living. But her need to make money forced her to commodify her work and thus placed both her morality and her art in question. The solution to her problem of becoming a respectable “wage-earning woman” while earning her livelihood through performance was to emphasize professionalism and history. Duncan positioned herself as the founder of a new art, a dance of the future that she located in the traditions of the past to authenticate and legitimize it. With the development of high-art traditions and the transition of women in the marketplace to the role of consumers and taste makers, Duncan could present herself publicly as art in a non-threatening, non-sexual way. By drawing on emerging middle-class traditions, she successfully negotiated the existing market structure. But as soon as she started to challenge these structures, she faced resistance and a closing market – the next chapter will explore how she negotiated this new challenge.

. . . She springs from the Great Race –  
From the line of Sovereigns, who  
Maintain the world and make it move . . .  
– Gordon Craig<sup>119</sup>

## Chapter Two

### Redefining the Market: A School and Dance for the Masses

Embracing both professionalism and history, Isadora Duncan positioned her art as “high” to appeal the newly emerged female consumers of culture. Although her earliest patrons were these upper-class women, in her later endeavors, she expressed her interest in educating people of all classes. As her friend Mary Desti wrote, “her contact cry was ‘Give me the worker, the artist, the poor, they understand. I am not for the amusement of the rich. Give me my friends, the artists, for them I created and danced the Resurrection.’”<sup>120</sup> In this chapter I will argue that Duncan’s later democratic aspirations represented a continuation of her attempts to deemphasize the commercial motivations behind her work. In her sustained attempts to negotiate art versus market, she sought to circumvent the world of commerce by opening a school and casting her work as for the masses. But even as she shifted her efforts to the masses and to education, commercial considerations kept her dependent upon the market. When post-World War I attitudes toward race and low culture threatened her anew, she relied upon racialist and class claims to remove her art from the threats of the commercial marketplace from below and to refine her ideals of the masses from the realities of not-quite-white people and people of color. These claims ultimately undercut her

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<sup>119</sup> Sol Hurok, *Sol Hurok Presents: A Memoir of the Dance World* (New York: Hermitage House, 1953), 36.

<sup>120</sup> Mary Desti, *The Untold Story: The Life of Isadora Duncan, 1921-1927* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1929), 17.

democratic aspirations.

Having achieved success in her career, Duncan sought to further legitimize herself as an artist and her dance as art through the establishment of a school. As early as 1907 she stated, “I have constantly had the clear intention of founding a school which would restore the dance to its former high level of art.”<sup>121</sup> Although she initially appealed to a wealthy audience in her performances, she looked to a different segment of the population for her school. Her advertisement for her first school in Grünewald read, “Physically and mentally fit, graceful girls under the age of ten, wishing to be educated in the art of Dance . . . In the selection of pupils, no national or social discrimination will be made. The school is democratic and international. Fatherless and motherless children, as well as children of uncertain origin, are also welcome.”<sup>122</sup> Kay Bardsley notes that among the children Duncan selected for this school, “with only one exception, all of them had an absent or deceased father.”<sup>123</sup> Duncan may have hoped to educate children similar to herself, or she may have sought complete devotion from her students by seeking out those with weak family structures. Indeed, six of her original students eventually adopted her last name, and in her memoirs, Irma Duncan (one of those six students) noted the infrequency with which she saw her own mother.

The Hamburg press reported on the worthy goals of Duncan’s Grünewald school: “This free, non-profit dance school, founded by Isadora Duncan and entirely supported by her financially, is not a philanthropic institution in the ordinary sense but an enterprise dedicated to the promotion of health and beauty in mankind. Both physically and spiritually the children here will receive an education providing them with the highest intelligence in the healthiest body.”<sup>124</sup> But even as she founded a non-profit endeavor, financial considerations kept Duncan dependent

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<sup>121</sup> Isadora Duncan, “The Purpose of My School” in *Isadora Speaks*, 37.

<sup>122</sup> Kurth, 151.

<sup>123</sup> Kay Bardsley, “Isadora Duncan’s First School,” *Dance Research Annual*, no. 10 (1979): 226.

<sup>124</sup> Irma Duncan, 6.



on the market. During the period she operated Grünewald, she supported not only her school, but also her mother, her sister, and Gordon Craig, among others.<sup>125</sup> A school prospectus for the fiscal year March 1, 1906, through June 30, 1907, indicated the breakdown of the school's 26,000-mark income: 12,000 came from Duncan; 7,500 came from subscription and membership fees; 3,500 came from contributions; 2,000 came from the children's performances; and 1,000 came from private classes with her sister, Elizabeth Duncan.<sup>126</sup> These financial burdens weighed on Isadora. On December 20, 1905, as she was getting the school underway, she wrote King Ferdinand of Bulgaria that she hoped "that in five or six years time the School may become a Self supporting Institution." She added, "This is a difficult thing for me to do alone. Capital and all costs I have given from money made solely from my dancing Self. The Building, I am paying for in installments – food clothes music etc. cost me more than 2000 marks a month."<sup>127</sup> At the beginning of 1908, she wrote Craig, "with School, Mama, Baby, my bank account never rises higher than 2000 marks!!! – but they tell me I'm a great success!"<sup>128</sup>

Although she displayed entrepreneurship in finding a means to earn money, she was ill equipped to manage the money. Duncan admitted her own difficulty with and aversion to the business side of her work. In December of 1906, she wrote a letter to Gordon Craig from the Hotel Bristol in Warsaw:

This Business is *Maddening*. The house was *sold out* last night – *crowds standing*. They brought me a muddled account this morning – 1700 roubles (*a rouble is 2 francs*) in *house*. Then a *long* list of so-called *expenses & taxes*, ending in wanting to hand me 440 roubles – This is obviously absurd – so I telegraphed you either to come if you could come or send a Business man to unravel the mystery . . . This *Contracting* and

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<sup>125</sup> Bardsley, 232, and Steegmuller, 69.

<sup>126</sup> Bardsley, 238.

<sup>127</sup> Kurth, 171.

<sup>128</sup> Steegmuller, 287.

*accounting is Death to any nobility of life or thought.*<sup>129</sup>

Duncan's performances were the only way she knew to make money. In a letter to Craig in the summer of 1907, she wrote, "I committed a grave error in judgment in thinking I could be able to make money in summer – something I never yet have been able to do in my life . . ." <sup>130</sup> With performing the only source of income she could find, she was restricted to the role of a laborer.

Compounding her difficulty accumulating sufficient funds was her excellent ability to spend money. In the same letter to Craig in which she bemoaned her failure to earn money in the summer, she also criticized their spendthrift ways: "You and I are not very practical people, but this summer our impracticality is the *limit*."<sup>131</sup> Florence Treadwell Boyton, who knew the Duncans in California, noted that such impracticality was a family trait:

The family was improvident. They had either abundance or nothing. There was no frugality, no thrift. Often friends and neighbors came to the rescue. There was much needless suffering because of lack of management but also a deal of childish adventure . . . They were governed by childish impulse . . . On getting a little money, they would go to the city and have a big French dinner with wine. On one meal would be spent money that could, if spend judiciously, have fed them the following week.<sup>132</sup>

After her first major commercial success in Berlin, when she had the potential to continue reaping the financial rewards of her popularity, instead of continuing to tour, Duncan and her family "revived a project, which we had long cherished, of making a pilgrimage to the very holiest shrine of Art, of going to our beloved Athens."<sup>133</sup> She recalled, "Our desire to make the Greek

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<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 254-256.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>132</sup> Millicent Dillon, *After Egypt: Isadora Duncan and Mary Cassatt, A Duel Biography* (New York: Dutton, 1990), 162.

<sup>133</sup> *My Life*, 86.

choruses and the ancient tragic dance live again was surely a very worthy effort, and one of utter impracticality. But, after the financial successes of Budapest and Berlin, I had no desire to make a world tour, and only used the money that I had earned to build a Greek Temple and revivify the Greek chorus.”<sup>134</sup> In retrospect, Duncan expressed a slightly shocked view of the staggering expenses of her family’s trip to Greece: “I look back now at our youthful aspirations as a really curious phenomena.”<sup>135</sup> Despite its noble intentions, the opening of the Grünewald school followed a similarly impulsive trend. Duncan recounted in her autobiography: “Certainly the sudden opening of this school, without the proper premeditation or capital or organisation, was the most rash undertaking imaginable; one that drove my manager to distraction . . . But this was quite in keeping with all our other undertakings, most unpractical and untimely and impulsive.”<sup>136</sup>

By the time she closed Grünewald in April of 1908 due to lack of funding, she had abandoned the idea of a self-supporting institution. For her subsequent schools, she sought patronage. The London *Gazette Times* quoted her in July of 1908: “I am devoted to my dancing and I love the little children of my school, but I am anxious to get someone to take the financial end off my shoulders. A millionaire will do, or a municipality, or an institution. I am perfectly willing to continue giving my services, but I do wish that someone would come forward and relieve me of the necessity for finding money as well.”<sup>137</sup> She sought funding for her school during her tours of the United States: “Other artists spend more than this school will cost on their jewels. Well, this is my jewel,” she told reporters at the *New York Times* when she arrived in New York on February 10, 1911.”<sup>138</sup> In 1915, after World War I forced her second school, in Bellevue, to close, she enlisted the help of Mabel Dodge for a potential school in the United States. In January

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>137</sup> Kurth, 222.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 27.

of 1915, Dodge wrote Gertrude Stein in Paris: “for Isadora we are engaged in the maddest project of getting her the Armory, where she can teach a thousand unemployed people’s poor children to *dance & feed & clothe them & charge rich people sums to come in & see her teach ’em.*”<sup>139</sup>

Even though they failed to drum up the funds to sustain her school, Duncan’s fund-raising activities provided a non-profit motive for her tours and performances. As long as she was dancing to support her school, she was free of the stigma of dancing for her personal profit. “If I were only a dancer I would not speak. But I am a teacher with a mission,” she told an audience in America.<sup>140</sup> Although she had used the concept of professionalism to legitimize herself as a “wage-earning woman,” once she had abandoned the idea of a self-supporting school, she emphasized that she did not intend her school to be a professional school: “I want to start a dancing school in America. By music and dance I want to train children how to live. I don’t want to train them for the stage. I hate children on the stage – though they would be better there than in the gutter.”<sup>141</sup> Mary Desti concurred, “That she would spend her life and fortune teaching a few children to become stage dancers where they might earn a scanty living, is too absurd to think of.”<sup>142</sup> Duncan later reiterated her goal to educate children, not to train performers: “People . . . thought that I wished to form a troupe of dancers to perform in the theatre . . . Certainly nothing was further from my thoughts. Far from wishing to develop theatre dancers, I only hoped to train in my school numbers of children who through dance, music, poetry and song, would express the feelings of the people, with grace and beauty.”<sup>143</sup>

She sought to separate art not only from commerce but also from necessity. In a speech in September of 1924, Duncan explained, “As my mother was very poor, and we often did not have

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 332.

<sup>140</sup> *Isadora Speaks*, 55.

<sup>141</sup> Irma Duncan and Allan Ross Macdougall, *Isadora Duncan’s Russian Days and Her Last Years in France* (New York: Covici-Friede, 1929), 168.

<sup>142</sup> Desti, 175.

<sup>143</sup> Macdougall, 111.

the money for the most necessary needs of life, our neighbors, who were aware of my dancing talent, advised my mother to let me dance before the public, so that I might earn money. And so, out of necessity, I was forced, a four-year-old child, to dance before the public. This is why I don't like children to dance before the public for money, as I experienced what it meant to dance for a piece of bread."<sup>144</sup> In her school, she sought to remove her students' artistic and educational activities from their monetary needs – a distinction she had struggled to establish herself.

It was important for Duncan to emphasize that the school was not a training school to maintain the conceit that dance was an art, free of commercial considerations, and to cast herself as the benefactress for this non-profit organization and thus as immune to commercial considerations herself. In an unmailed letter, she wrote:

When I was twenty-six and suddenly found myself earning large sums by my performances, I might have, like many other young women, bought pearls, diamonds and fancy clothes. It was then, however, obeying some inner voice, that I had the idea of adopting twenty poor little children, saying to myself: "I am going to give these beings a finer life, a higher education, so that later in their turn they can spread joy and beauty about them like a glow over this sad earth."<sup>145</sup>

Through such magnanimous sentiments, she aligned herself with patrons like the upper-class society women who supported her own early endeavors, but she also distanced herself from the material trappings of that class.

She portrayed herself above material goods, and she also downplayed the commercial and monetary considerations of her endeavors by expressing displeasure for anything related to business. "An artist cannot be a business woman at the same time," she told Maurice Dumesnil.<sup>146</sup> Mary Desti described Duncan's reaction to Desti's perfume business, which was attracting a

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<sup>144</sup> Duncan and Macdougall, 270-271.

<sup>145</sup> Macdougall, 106.

<sup>146</sup> Dumesnil, 63.

famous clientèle: “she decided for some reason or another I was an artist and it was too degrading to have anything to do with business, and as a means of ending it, she suggested that we stand at the window and throw the perfume bottles into the street. ‘That,’ she said, ‘would be a great ending and show your disdain for business.’”<sup>147</sup> Although Duncan publicly maintained the distinction between artist and businessperson, privately she expressed her understanding of the interrelation of art and commerce. In December of 1906, she wrote to Gordon Craig from Warsaw: “This subject of *music* must be fixed, or it will be the complete ruin of me as an artist and eventually financially also – as finances generally fall when art falls in spite of all one can say to the contrary.”<sup>148</sup>

As finding patronage became increasingly difficult, Duncan grew increasingly agitated with the wealthy. On March 5, 1915, the *New York World* reported that a few days after giving a free concert at Jacob Adler’s Grand Theater in Lower East Side with her students, Duncan had told her audience at the Metropolitan Opera House, “If you play a symphony of Schubert on the East Side the people will not care for it. Well, we gave a free performance – in a theatre without a box office – so refreshing! – and the people sat there transfixed, with tears rolling down their cheeks; that is how they cared for it.”<sup>149</sup> On March 6, 1915, *Musical America* reported that she chided her Met audience: “My work is appreciated by those in people in the gallery because only the poor people of this country are intelligent.”<sup>150</sup> Ann Daly argues, “While she lauded the abilities of the tenement-dwellers on the Lower East Side to appreciate her art, for example, she did so primarily as a means of shaming unresponsive millionaires (who, it was implied, should know better) into contributing money for her to start a school.”<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Desti, 60-61.

<sup>148</sup> Steegmuller, 175-176.

<sup>149</sup> Kurth, 330-331.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

<sup>151</sup> Daly, *Done into Dance*, 115.

Her dependence on patrons was complicated by her intense desire to assert her independence. Allan Ross Macdougall recalled that Duncan used shaming techniques also in her personal relationship with Paris Singer: “Each time Singer gave or offered her something he considered valuable, she refused it or picked a quarrel, as if to demonstrate: ‘You may be rich, but don’t imagine that you can buy me.’ . . . Isadora often antagonized the very people whose patronage she sought. She resented his wealth; to her financiers – indeed all the rich – were insensitive to human values.” Macdougall concluded, “Throughout her life she would have it known that she considered business morally subservient to artistic morality.”<sup>152</sup> She thus explained away her difficulties with money and business by asserting the superiority of art over commerce.

She continued to shame her Western audiences for their lack of support when she accepted an invitation from the Russian commissar of education to open a school in Russia. In a speech in Paris before her departure for Russia she was adamant that her move was not political. She explained that it was instead necessitated by the lack of support she received from Western governments:

When I was twenty-one, I offered my school to Germany. The Kaiserin responded that it was immoral! The Kaiser said it was revolutionary! Then I proposed my school to America, but they said there that it stood for the vine . . . I then proposed my school to Greece, but the Greeks were too busy fighting the Turks. Today I propose my school to France, but France, in the person of the amiable Minister of Fine Arts, gives me a smile. I cannot nourish the children in my school on a smile. . . . As for me, I wait. Help me get my school. If not, I will go to Russia with the Bolsheviks. I know nothing about politics.”<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Blair, 274.

<sup>153</sup> Duncan and Macdougall, 6-7.

She denied moving to Russia for political reasons, but she freely admitted her disappointment in the Western world. She specifically pinpointed the moral failings of American commercialism and capitalism: “Perhaps I am becoming a Bolshevik. But all my life I have wanted to teach children, to have free schools and a free theater. America rejected this, but there they still have child labor, and only the rich can see the opera, and beauty is commercialized by theater managers and motion picture magnates. All they want is money, money, money.”<sup>154</sup>

Once in Soviet Russia, she continued to express her displeasure for the commercialism in the West. In an article in *Isvestia* on November 23, 1921, she declared: “I have left Europe and Art that was too tightly bound with commercialism and it will be against my convictions and desires if I shall have to give again paid performances for the bourgeois public. For the realization of my ideas of teaching masses of children – I only need a big and warm hall.”<sup>155</sup> Her anti-capitalist sentiments heightened as she embraced the ideals – thought not necessarily the reality – of her new home. She wrote an open letter to the English press:

Here one feels that perhaps for the second time in the world’s history a great force has arisen to give capitalism, which stands for monstrous greed and villainy, one great blow. The dragon, man-eating, labor-exploiting, has here received his death stroke. What matters it that in his final throes he has cast destruction about him? The valiant hero who smote him still lives, though enfeebled from the deadly struggle, and from him will be born a new world.<sup>156</sup>

As Franklin Rosemont later wrote, “In the great contest between Capital and Labor, Isadora left not the smallest doubt as to which side she was on. ‘In my red tunic,’ she wrote, ‘I have always danced the Revolution.’”<sup>157</sup> But Duncan’s political leanings weren’t as constant as Rosemont

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<sup>154</sup> *Isadora Speaks*, 63.

<sup>155</sup> Blair, 299.

<sup>156</sup> *The Art of the Dance*, 109-110.

<sup>157</sup> *Isadora Speaks*, xii.



suggests. During her tour to the United States from Russia, she returned to denying her political motives to Western audiences. On October 2, 1922, the *New York Herald* reported that she told a New York audience, “We come to America with only one idea, to tell of the Russian conscience and to work for the rapprochement of the two great countries. No politics, no propaganda.”<sup>158</sup>

Duncan not only opened schools to teach the children of the masses; she also enacted class struggle onstage. In 1917, well before she moved to Russia, she was inspired by the Russian Revolution to create a dance to represent the Russian people’s freedom from tsarist oppression. Carl Van Vechten described her performance:

In the *Marche Slave* of Chaikovsky Isadora symbolizes her conception of the Russian moujik rising from slavery to freedom. With her hands bound behind her back, groping, stumbling, head bowed, knees bent, she struggles forward . . . When the strains of *God Save the Czar* are first heard in the orchestra she falls to her knees and you see the peasant shuddering under the blows of the knout. The picture is a tragic one, cumulative in its horrific details.<sup>159</sup>

When she moved to Soviet Russia, she continued to perform *Marche Slave*, and she also created new works that drew directly from her observations of Russian workers and their culture. She used traditional work songs as music and appropriated movements inspired by the worker. Noting that such dances were “no novelty” to Russian audiences by the 1920s, Elizabeth Souritz writes: “Many dances that Duncan performed or choreographed for the children of her school were dances of social protest, heroic dances, or work dances, like ‘The Blacksmith,’ often using Russian popular or revolt songs.”<sup>160</sup> Duncan composed *The Mother and Revolutionary* for herself and harvest and hunger dances inspired by the Volga region; Carol Pratl writes: “For the girls, she

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<sup>158</sup> McVay, 106.

<sup>159</sup> Carl Van Vechten, “The New Isadora” in *Nijinsky, Pavlova, Duncan: Three Lives in Dance*, edited by Paul Magriel (New York: DiCapo, 1977), 31.

<sup>160</sup> Elizabeth Souritz, “Isadora Duncan’s Influence on Dance in Russia,” *Dance Chronicle* 18, no. 2 (1995): 287-288.

chose a group of revolutionary songs. The Dubinshka depicts workers hauling a rope as they sing. In the Warshavianka, the young women are warriors, each one seizing the flag in turn from the hands of her fallen comrade, until all lie dead, only to rise again. The dances, while often harsh and sad in subject matter, share a theme of hope, of ultimate triumph over diversity.”<sup>161</sup>

Duncan linked these dances with her goals for her students. In a letter dated July 10, 1924, she wrote to Irma Duncan from Takshent: “These red-tuniced kids are the future. So it is fine to work for them. Plough the ground, sow the seed, and prepare for the new generation that will express the new world. What else is there to do? . . . with you I see the Future. It is there – and we will dance the Ninth Symphony yet.”<sup>162</sup> In September of 1924, upon her departure from Moscow for Berlin, where she hoped to drum up support for her school, Duncan reiterated these sentiments to the audience watching her students perform:

These children, here, that you have just admired, are mostly children of workers and peasants. Are they not beautiful? And does it not prove that they can be cultured and beautiful? I have the desire to give the greatest joy and the greatest beauty to the children of the workers. To make them so perfect that they will be envied by the millionaire children. You have surely heard the legend of Cornelia, wherein pearls and diamonds were compared to the natural beauty of children. I would like to have the workers say, when they see thousands of children dancing in a great folk-festival: “These are our jewels.”<sup>163</sup>

The revolutions she enacted in her dances accompanied the revolution she aspired to achieve with her dancers. In Berlin on December 20, 1924, she dictated a chapter of a book and recounted the September performances: “It is marvelous to be able to form human lives! I have taken these children from the lowest proletariat, weak and diseased and destined for misery and early death –

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<sup>161</sup> Duncan, Pratl, and Splatt, 162.

<sup>162</sup> Duncan and Macdougall, 251.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 275-276.

the children of men who dig ditches and break stones on the highway – and before I left Moscow they were dancing in the Grand Opera and the people had arisen and cheered while they cried.”<sup>164</sup>

Ann Daly argues that Duncan switched her focus from trying to woo the upper crust to trying to teach the working classes as a way to spread her ideals:

In a way, Duncan, who believed that “education of the young is the only way to bring taste and understanding to the working class,” was not so different from the self-described “merchants of culture, professional men and artists,” who started the Metropolitan Museum of Art. These robber barons-cum-culture brokers sought to establish “Culture” from the top down, so that eventually even the uneducated manual laborer could gain enlightenment through the love of the beautiful.<sup>165</sup>

Duncan wrote in her autobiography, “Give art to the people who need it. Great music should no longer be kept for the delight of a few cultured people, it should be given free to the masses.”<sup>166</sup>

Daly argues that in advocating the uplift of the masses through arts, Duncan “displaced the definition of class from money to art. If class brought ‘Culture’ (as the nouveau riche took great pains to demonstrate), then could not ‘Culture’ bring class? Duncan, and the girls and women who would later flock to Duncan-style dance classes, believed so.”<sup>167</sup> To Duncan, just as art was superior to business, so too were art and culture more important than money as barometers for success and facilitators of social mobility. In reflecting upon her first American tour in 1908, Duncan noted her successes and shortcomings: “And so it happened that one day in July I found myself all alone on a big ship bound for New York – just eight years since I had left there on a cattle boat. I was already famous in Europe. I had created an Art, a School, a Baby. Not so bad.

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<sup>164</sup> McVay, 229.

<sup>165</sup> Daly, *Done into Dance*, 113-114.

<sup>166</sup> *My Life*, 182.

<sup>167</sup> Daly, *Done into Dance*, 111-112.

But, as far as finances went, I was not much richer than before.”<sup>168</sup> Her monetary situation had not changed, but her achievements – as an artist, an educator, and a mother – and her improved status were evident in her upgrade from the “cattle boat” to the “big ship.”

Although she condemned the rich and claimed to support the masses, her claims were undercut by her reported sense of entitlement to a wealthy lifestyle. In 1909, Duncan had made enough money to buy a house and large studio in Neuilly, a posh section of Paris. She commissioned designer Paul Poiret to decorate it, and she donned garments by Poiret as well as Mariano Fortuny. Having achieved this lifestyle – through her own earnings as well as through her relationship with Paris Singer – she appears to have been unwilling to let it go, even when her financial means no longer warranted it. Desti reported that Duncan insisted on a lifestyle outside of her means: “Heavens! Here we were without a penny, yet she wanted to go by auto to Berlin. Nothing ever seemed impossible to her. She declared she could not get in to a train.”<sup>169</sup> Macdougall noted as well, “One of Isadora’s favorite mottoes was – at least in her later penurious days – ‘When in doubt always go to the best hotel!’”<sup>170</sup> Duncan insisted on luxuries for herself and was reportedly extremely generous with others as well. Her friends and biographers reported that she frequently entertained and usually invited guests to her meals because she hated to eat alone. Dumesnil wrote of the parties she threw in Paris before her South American tour: “These parties were a heavy drain on her funds, for she provided food and drink with her customary lavishness and she never knew how many guests to expect . . . and she no longer had anyone to underwrite the costs.”<sup>171</sup> Desti recounted that in 1927, “Walking in the street without a penny or without a place to lay her head was not at all her idea of life. ‘We did that in our youth,’ she said. ‘Now is the time to reap a little of the rest and beauty we are entitled

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<sup>168</sup> *My Life*, 156.

<sup>169</sup> Desti, 129-130.

<sup>170</sup> Macdougall, 222.

<sup>171</sup> Blair, 253.

to. Now I refuse absolutely to be poor. I will die first. I hate shoddy, shabby poverty.’”<sup>172</sup>

As much as Duncan claimed to represent the masses, she also stumbled when she was outside her comfort zone. Her trip to the Volga region inspired her dances of the workers for the stage. But, in letter dated April 28, 1924, and sent to Irma Duncan from Ekaterinberg, she revealed her personal discomfort:

You have no idea what a living nightmare is until you see this town. Perhaps the killing here of a certain family in a cellar has cast a sort of Edgar Allen Poe gloom over the place – or perhaps it was always like that. . . . Our two performances were a *fouere noire* and, as usual, we are stranded and don’t know where to go. There is no restaurant here, only “common eating houses,” and no coiffeur. The only remaining fossil of that name, while burning my hair off with trembling fingers, assured me there was not a *dama* left here, they shot ’em *all*.<sup>173</sup>

In another letter to Irma from Samarkand, at the end of June of 1924, she wrote, “There are marvelous things here to buy, but *helas!* The land seems a veritable paradise – for the natives. The whites [white Russians, who opposed the Bolsheviks] don’t understand how to live here.”<sup>174</sup> In 1921, she recalled a conversation she had with Nikolai Podvoysky, a Bolshevik commissar she admired. In that conversation Podvoysky had urged her to “come here and live with us as we live.” But Duncan “flushed before the spare figure, the Christlike face, the heroic eyes.” She recounted, “What was I, a poor pagan sybarite, used to soft beds, good food?”<sup>175</sup> In this statement she admitted both the luxuries and the limitations of her bourgeois life.

Such sentiments were not limited to descriptions of the Russia countryside. She secluded herself in the country for the birth of her first child, Deirdre, and related the experience in her

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<sup>172</sup> Desti, 229.

<sup>173</sup> Duncan and Macdougall, 254-255.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>175</sup> Isadora Duncan, “A Meeting with Comrade Podvoisky” in *Isadora Speaks*, 75.

autobiography: “With alternate hope and despair, I often thought of the pilgrimage of my childhood, my youth, my wanderings in distant countries, my discoveries of Art, and they were as a misty, far-away prologue, leading up to this – the before-birth of a child. What any peasant could have! This was the culminating point of all my ambitions!”<sup>176</sup> Her description reveals her upwardly mobile aspirations (and the limitations of these aspirations). Her account of the pain of childbirth is also revealing: “Of course, one can reply that all women don’t suffer to this degree. No, neither do the Red Indians, the peasants, or the African negroes. But the more civilised the woman, the more fearful the agony, the useless agony. For the sake of the civilised woman, a civilised remedy to this horror should be found.”<sup>177</sup> She clearly distinguishes between herself – a civilized woman – and “others”: native Americans, rural foreigners, and blacks – people on the outside of the boundaries of what she defines as civilization.

Duncan’s democratic aspirations to create a dance and school for the masses – for all – were thus undermined by the divisions she drew among people. Carol Martin argues, “She wanted dance to be for everyone – everyone that she deemed worthy as defined by race and class.”<sup>178</sup> An element of eugenics had long existed in her language. In her 1903 speech “The Dance of the Future,” she explained that the “question of differing opinions on the ballet and the new dance . . . is not only a question of true art, it is a question of race.”<sup>179</sup> Duncan articulated the racial basis for her dance again in discussing the Greek influence: “The oldest of the dances that were art were those of Asia, and of Egypt – which influenced the Greek dance. But those earlier dances were not of our race; it is to Greece that we must turn.”<sup>180</sup> But by the 1920s, her distinctions between the races were more explicit. She called out the “Red Indian” and the

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<sup>176</sup> *My Life*, 140.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>178</sup> Martin, 132.

<sup>179</sup> Isadora Duncan, “The Dance of the Future” in *The Art of the Dance*, 61.

<sup>180</sup> Isadora Duncan, “The Dance of the Greeks” in *The Art of the Dance*, 92.

“African negro” in describing childbirth, and she even more clearly addressed race in her description of the dance she envisioned for America:

I, too, had a vision – the vision of America dancing a dance that would be the worthy expression of the song Walt [Whitman] heard when he heard American singing. This music . . . would have nothing to do with the sensual lilt of the jazz rhythm; it would be like the vibration of the American soul striving upward through labour to harmonious life. Nor had this dance that I visioned any vestige of the fox-trot or the Charleston – rather it was the living leap of the child springing toward the heights, towards its future accomplishments, towards a new great vision of life that would express America.<sup>181</sup>

She goes on to say that the dance she envisions for America “will have nothing in it of the . . . sensual convulsion of the negro.”<sup>182</sup>

Her sense of race may have been shaped in part by market realities. By the teens, Duncan was losing ground from several directions. She wrote in her autobiography, that when she traveled to San Francisco, she “was despondent at the lack of response of my native town to support my ideal of a future school. They already had a crowd of my imitators and several imitation schools already, with which they seemed quite satisfied.”<sup>183</sup> It might be argued that these imitators furthered Duncan’s vision by spreading their interpretations of her ideals on a larger scale to a wider audience. But Duncan didn’t see it that way. Because audiences “seemed quite satisfied” by these knockoffs, they had no need for the original and she no longer had a place in that market. In addition, other dances were moving into the market. William Leach explains that members of the recently developed consumer culture at the beginning of the twentieth century created a “cult of the new.”<sup>184</sup> While Duncan’s expressive and artistic work in

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<sup>181</sup> *My Life*, 243.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>184</sup> Leach, 3.

the early part of the twentieth century appealed to a group of upper- and middle-class women looking for models of a “liberated woman,” by the teens, many consumers sought new forms of dance. Elizabeth Francis writes, “The younger generation seemed to have little interest in carrying on the political torch their foremothers had borne so long. Instead, they reveled in new styles, youth-oriented activities, and the pleasures and sensations made possible by consumer capitalism.”<sup>185</sup> In her autobiography, Duncan described the new dances on the market in the teens:

At that moment all New York had the “jazz” dance craze. Women and men of the best society, old and young, spent their time in the huge salons of such hotels as the Biltmore, dancing the fox-trot to the barbarous yaps and cries of the negro orchestra . . . In fact the whole atmosphere in 1915 disgusted me, and I determined to return with my school to Europe.<sup>186</sup>

But it wasn’t much better for her in Europe. She wrote to Gordon Craig from Paris on December 20, 1919: “Paris is crowded with foreigners & Barbarians – spending enormous sums of money in a perpetual whirligig of fox-trot bands. There are *four* in this hotel, who play the same tunes morning, *noon* & all night – the poor Archangel [pianist Walter Rummel] is distracted & we don’t know where to go or how!”<sup>187</sup> In 1912, James Weldon Johnson wrote about the popularity of this new culture, as observed by his title character in *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*: “I do not think it would be an exaggeration to say that in Europe the United States is popularly known better by rag-time than by anything else it has produced in a generation. In Paris they call it American music.”<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Elizabeth Francis, *The Secret Treachery of Words: Modernism and Feminism in America* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xiii.

<sup>186</sup> *My Life*, 227.

<sup>187</sup> Steegmuller, 348.

<sup>188</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 87.



No longer novel either in the United States or abroad, after the war, Duncan became, as Elizabeth Francis argues, “a monument – an immobile allusion to a lost moment of freedom, part of a nostalgia on the part of cultural radicals for their prewar heyday.”<sup>189</sup> Duncan’s careful positioning of dance as art was threatened by new dances emerging from black culture and gaining popularity among respectable whites. The integrity of the art of dance was compromised by the acceptance of dance from a culture she associated with savagery and barbarism. At the end of *My Life*, Duncan explained, “It seems monstrous to me that anyone should believe that the jazz rhythm expresses America. Jazz rhythm expresses the primitive savage.”<sup>190</sup> Francis posits, “Duncan’s waning cultural power and her attempts to shore it up rested on an implicitly white appeal to civilization.”<sup>191</sup>

Duncan’s racial anxiety and rhetoric may have partly resulted from her anxiety about her own racial and economic background. Duncan’s ancestry on her mother’s side was Irish Catholic and middle class, but her father’s checkered business dealings put the family’s social status in question. Florence Treadwell recalled that Isadora’s brother Augustin had “a secret ambition to clear his father’s name.”<sup>192</sup> When Duncan’s mother divorced Duncan’s father, she took on a nontraditional role for a middle-class woman: breadwinner (a role that Isadora subsequently and soon acquired). Duncan and her family’s social and economic background was thus problematic. In describing her family’s failed attempts to live like the ancient Greeks in Greece, Duncan explained, “I was, after all, but a Scotch-Irish-American.”<sup>193</sup> Carol Martin writes that “despite being, or perhaps precisely because of being, Scots Irish American,” Duncan created an

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<sup>189</sup> Francis, *The Secret Treachery of Words*, 23.

<sup>190</sup> *My Life*, 244.

<sup>191</sup> Francis, *The Secret Treachery of Words*, xxv.

<sup>192</sup> Kurth, 27.

<sup>193</sup> *My Life*, 99.

“imaginary genealogy” with a “white pedigree.”<sup>194</sup> Carl Wittke describes the distinction between Irish and Scotch-Irish as an American phenomenon: “the Scotch-Irish insisted upon differentiating between the descendants of earlier immigrants from Ireland and more recent arrivals.”<sup>195</sup> Noel Ignatiev argues that this distinction recreated what was “a racial (but not ethnic) line invented in Ireland” as “an ethnic (but not racial) line in America.”<sup>196</sup> In identifying herself as Scotch-Irish, Duncan acknowledged her ethnic background without compromising her race or linking herself and her family with more recent Irish immigrants. Both sides of Duncan’s family came from early waves of immigration: her maternal grandfather, Colonel Thomas Gray, had come to the United States from Ireland in 1819, and her father, Joseph Duncan, was born that year in Philadelphia to a father who was a professor in Chestertown, Maryland.<sup>197</sup> By asserting that her grandparents were pioneers, she distinguished them from recent immigrants whose race remained in question. In her autobiography she wrote, “my grandmother, thinking of Ireland, used often to sing the Irish songs and dance the Irish jigs, only I fancy that into these Irish jigs had crept some of the heroic spirit of the pioneer and the battle with the Redskins.”<sup>198</sup> Her references to her grandparents as Irish and as pioneers reinforced her ethnic and racial heritage.

Duncan was able to take pride in her Irish background because of a variety of political and economic developments that linked race and class in the United States. David Roediger argues that working-class identity and white identity evolved hand in hand. He writes that “Irish-Americans . . . treasured their whiteness, as entitling them to both political rights and to jobs.”<sup>199</sup> Roediger argues that the idea of the lazy black “other” appealed particularly to Irish-American

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<sup>194</sup> Martin, 128.

<sup>195</sup> Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 39.

<sup>196</sup> Ignatiev, 39.

<sup>197</sup> Kurth, 7-8.

<sup>198</sup> *My Life*, 243.

<sup>199</sup> David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 136.

immigrants, who were themselves considered non-white for much of the nineteenth century.<sup>200</sup> The Irish had particularly contentious relations with blacks in the early nineteenth century. In 1843, John Finch, a traveler from England, noted, “It is a curious fact that the democratic part, and particularly the poorer class of Irish immigrants in America, are greater enemies to the negro population, and greater advocates of the continuance of negro slavery, than any portion of the population in the free States.”<sup>201</sup> Ignatiev argues that during the nineteenth century, Irish were able to distinguish themselves from blacks only by asserting their whiteness: “To be acknowledged as white, it was not enough for the Irish to have competitive advantage over Afro-Americans in the labor market; in order for them to avoid the taint of blackness it was necessary that no Negro be allowed to work in occupations where Irish were to be found.”<sup>202</sup> Because of this distinction, African Americans were pushed into “the ranks of the destitute self-employed” below the “waged labor force of the industry,” which was made up of the Irish.<sup>203</sup> Thus, by the turn of the century, Ignatiev argues, the Irish had become white. Matthew Frye Jacobson further argues that as the Irish became racially white they became ethnically Irish.<sup>204</sup>

Thus by the time Duncan came of age in the twentieth century, there had been four important developments: the Irish had become white racially, they had become Irish ethnically, they had developed their sense of race and ethnicity in step with a negotiation of the capitalist culture, and they had defined their occupations in part by excluding blacks. Because the Irish had become white, Duncan could express pride in her Irish heritage. The *San Francisco Examiner* wrote on November 17, 1917, “Deep down in her soul is a great love for that Erin – the true

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<sup>200</sup> Roediger, 14.

<sup>201</sup> Ignatiev, 97.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>204</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 51-52.

Hellas of our days – whose blood flows in her veins.”<sup>205</sup> Later, she taught her Russian students not only dances of the Russian revolution but also dances of Irish independence. But because of how the Irish became white, she sought to occupy a profession distinct from blacks. When dancing inspired by black culture came into vogue, it threatened the character and position of her dance. To negotiate that threat to her occupation, she recast her dance racially and asserted its difference from black culture and popular dances.

Having used this exclusionary tactic, Duncan then needed to justify her claim that her dance was “for the masses.” She did so by setting herself up against not only blacks (whose world represented the “sensual” and “savage”) but also against the wealthy (whose world represented the “profane”).<sup>206</sup> In the same breath that she denounced “the sensual convulsion of the negro,” she condemned “the old-fashioned waltz and mazurka” as “an expression of sickly sentimentality and romance which our youth has outgrown, and the minuet is the expression of unctuous servility of the courtiers of the time of Louis XIV and hooped skirts.”<sup>207</sup> By removing blacks and the wealthy from her definition of dance, she was able to position her work for the greatest rival of both groups: the working-class white. She announced that the dance of the future “would be like the vibration of the American soul striving upward through labour to harmonious life.”<sup>208</sup> She enacted such labor through dances such as her *Marche Slave*. The *Istvestia* described Duncan’s performance: “Against the background of the Tchaikovsky music, Duncan depicted in moving gestures a bent, oppressed, heavy-laden, fettered slave, who falls exhausted to his knees . . . He lifts his weighed-down head, and his face shows an awful grimace of hate. With all his force he straightens himself and breaks his chains. Then he brings from behind his back his

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<sup>205</sup> *San Francisco Examiner* (November 17, 1917), Isadora Duncan Collection, San Francisco Performing Arts Library and Museum.

<sup>206</sup> *My Life*, 243, 244, and 170.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 244-245.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

crooked and stiffened arms – forward to a new and joyful life.”<sup>209</sup>

Her allusions to and embrace of working-class imagery and her display of class conflict on stage had precedence in other performing genres. W.T. Lhamon and Robert Allen outline the ways issues of class were tied up with issues of race and gender, respectively, in minstrelsy and burlesque. Lhamon writes that minstrelsy was more complex than just whites mocking blacks; working-class whites used race on stage as a means of expressing themselves against the upper-class men they resented. Allen notes a similar staging of class relations in posters advertising burlesque in the 1890s. In burlesque, however, the overtly sexual woman rather than the caricatured black man served the purpose of undermining the upper-class male: “Her sexual appeal is guaranteed by its economic value. It can be used to obtain the trappings of the high life through an inversion of ‘normal’ sexual power relations . . . But in that exercise of power, the burlesque performer becomes for the poster’s viewer one of the working-class ‘us’ whose domination is over the upper-class ‘them.’”<sup>210</sup> The class tensions played out by these racially and sexually charged relationships reveal the power of performance and the body – a racial body and/or a gendered body – to convey social critique: “Both [burlesque and minstrelsy] were constructed around ironic, low-other characters, whose speech, costume, behavior, and demeanor helped to structure different but homologous ideological problematics: gender and race, respectively.”<sup>211</sup> As a middle-class woman, Duncan did not need to engage in these tools of irony, but she did enact her own problematic on stage: by invoking the communist laborer, Duncan aligned herself against the capitalist elite, who no longer supported her school.

By embracing the worker, it can be argued that Duncan also rejected the middle class. Duncan’s interest in high art and the masses echoed a similar focus by writers such as William Butler Yeats and T.S. Eliot, as described by Amy Koritz. Koritz argues that Yeats “focuses

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<sup>209</sup> Duncan and Macdougall, 94-95.

<sup>210</sup> Allen, 214.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

attention on the two extremes of a cultural or conceptual spectrum, using the ‘lower’ to ground the ‘higher.’” She continues, “this is actually a displacement of the ‘lower’ by the ‘higher,’ effectively neutralizing its participation, while at the same time dismissing what lies between them . . . Yeat’s conceptual framework make the middle class seem an impure pollutant of two pure extremes – peasant and aristocrat.”<sup>212</sup> Similarly, even as Duncan claimed to champion the masses, her goal to elevate them through high art likely would have had the effect to “neutralize” them. Her invocation of the rhetoric of both high art and of the masses set up middle-class-driven capitalism – and related commercialism and materialism – as her foe. Koritz writes, “The value of effacing personality in a performance is at times overridden by a need to establish an alliance between working-class and high art, to the end of staving off the encroachment of middle-class mass culture.”<sup>213</sup>

The racial and nativist polemics Duncan espoused toward the end of her life thus reflected elements of an economic identity and represented her continuing negotiation of a capitalist society she struggled to fit into. Her sense of allegiance to class and social systems was dynamic, though consistently motivated by market pressures. Having lost both her financial support from her elite patrons and her relevancy among consumers, Duncan repositioned her dance as for the masses. By elevating art over business, embracing the masses, and embodying the worker on stage, she rejected the middle-class values that undergirded capitalist culture, even as she maintained bourgeois aspirations and identities. The tension between the reality of her market-driven lifestyle and the idealism of her market-denouncing persona will be the focus of the next chapter, which will look at *My Life* as one last place where Duncan acted out her struggle between art and market.

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<sup>212</sup> Koritz, 95.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

“ ... for she was of that accursed race of artists, who believe each thing they say while they are saying it; yes, who would go to the stake for that moment’s belief. ”

– Dorothy Parker<sup>214</sup>

### Chapter Three

#### Toward a “New World”: The Struggle of Art against Capitalism in *My Life*

After positioning her dance as art, herself as a professional, and her school for the masses, Isadora Duncan had one last opportunity to make her case for respectability: her autobiography. The format of the autobiography gave Duncan the freedom to record her life and accomplishments the way she wanted them interpreted or remembered. This opportunity was significant for her because although writing was not her preferred mode of communication – “If I could tell you what I mean, there would be no point in dancing”<sup>215</sup> – there were limitations to what she could express to the public through dancing. She supplemented many of her performances with speeches, gave written and spoken statements (often of some length) to the press, and even published a pamphlet based on one of her speeches (1903’s “Dance of the Future”). But her autobiography was by far her largest publishing project. Through it, she had the opportunity to continue to address the problem of her status as a wage-earning artist in an economic system that did not support art. In this chapter I will argue that in her autobiography she worked through the tensions of market and art by casting her life in economic and labor terms and ultimately placing her life under communism as a foil to the life of an artist in market-

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<sup>214</sup> Dorothy Parker, “Poor, Immortal Isadora” in *Journalistas: 100 Years of the Best Writing and Reporting by Women Journalists*, edited by Eleanor Mills and Kira Cochrane (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2005), 317.

<sup>215</sup> *My Life*, 3.

driven America. She set up her departure for Russia in her autobiography in commercial and material terms by describing four experiences in particular: the character-building lessons of her poor childhood, the superficiality of the wealthy women who engaged her for charity events, the excesses and emptiness of the life of the rich she experienced firsthand as an adult, and the futility of finding reliable funding from Western patrons and countries. These themes drive Duncan's autobiography to the extent that her memoir can be read as a critique of materialism and capitalism.

Duncan undertook the project of writing her autobiography in 1925, when she was living in Nice. She had left Soviet Russia in the fall of 1924 for a tour of Germany to raise money for her Moscow school. After the tour was cut short and issues regarding her contract and passport had been resolved, she ended up back in France. For the next two years, she moved back and forth between France and Nice, trying to earn funds for her Moscow school and also struggling with her own financial issues, such as the impending foreclosure on her property outside Paris. George Maurevert recalled, "I remember that Isadora Duncan had at that time many difficulties that could only be conjured away by the publication of her Memoirs, for which American publishers had made splendid offers."<sup>216</sup> In a letter dated February 1, 1925, Isadora wrote to Irma: "Tell me what hope there is for the school? Will the house remain? Is anything stable or is it quicksand? My only hope of funds at this moment is in the Memoirs . . . If I receive the \$20,000 promised, I will either come to Moscow in the spring with money, or if you think Moscow hopeless, you can join me in London with sixteen pupils. But reflect well which will be best."<sup>217</sup> Her desperation at the time she started writing her memoirs is shown in the fact she considered starting a for-profit school, something she had previously considered unacceptable. She wrote to Irma on January 27, 1926: "Please answer this letter at once, dear Irma, and see if,

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<sup>216</sup> Duncan and Macdougall, 303-304.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.



with what I have here as a foundation, we can't create a practical moneymaking school. For I see at the present epoch that it is either that or suicide. One can't continue to live on nothing."<sup>218</sup>

It was with this attitude that Duncan sat down to write her autobiography in 1925, and money stayed on her mind even as she wrote it: "Kindly pardon me as I again repeat that the quality of my writing depends entirely on whether I have capital to write the book in peace of mind," Duncan wrote her publishers on February 25, 1927.<sup>219</sup> Novelist Glenway Westcott recalled, "She told me it was the only thing she had ever done for the money, and she was ashamed, and having spent the money she could not give it up."<sup>220</sup> Indeed, Desti reported that Duncan's generosity had not waned in her later years: "The daily need for money was terrible. Her hotel bill grew by leaps and bounds. No visitor (and there were dozens daily) ever came without being invited for tea, or a cocktail, or dinner, so long as the hotel would allow. She had three and four guests at least every day for dinner."<sup>221</sup>

Partly because of the situation under which she wrote her memoirs, it has drawn criticism. Joseph Mazo wrote, "Duncan's autobiography, *My Life*, was written because she needed money. It swelters in melodrama, and it seems inadvisable to believe that Isadora always said what she said she said."<sup>222</sup> Those that knew her agreed that her memories did not always align with theirs. Francis Steegmuller notes that "in his copy of *My Life*, now in the Biblioteque National in Paris, Craig festooned the page [on their meeting] with corrections and written in the margin, 'This cannot have been written by I.D.'"<sup>223</sup> Perhaps anticipating criticism, in his preface to the 1927 edition, publisher Horace Liveright wrote, "Any one who has ever been in

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<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 316-318.

<sup>219</sup> Kurth, 538.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 549.

<sup>221</sup> Desti, 205.

<sup>222</sup> Mazo, 38.

<sup>223</sup> Steegmuller, 21.

correspondence with her will recognize her characteristic style. When she died the manuscript was not in type so she had no opportunity to read proof or make corrections, but the work as is is now presented to the public as she wrote it.”<sup>224</sup>

Although some of her acquaintances – Victor Seroff in particular – expressed concern that her manuscript had been heavily edited or rewritten by an outside force, it seems more likely that inaccuracies or exaggerations in anecdotes resulted from an element of performance in her autobiography. This performative quality reflects the method she used to “write” her memoirs, relying on dictation rather than actual composition.<sup>225</sup> Allan Ross Macdougall attributed the tone and content of *My Life* to these dictation sessions:

In her extraordinary autobiography which she spasmodically wrote and dictated during the last years of her life . . . she sometimes strayed from the austere road of truth into romantic bypaths of exaggeration. Often, to please her delighted listeners – I was happy to be of that small band of many occasions in Paris and Nice – very often, she dwelt wordily, though amusingly, in a never-never land of fantasy.”<sup>226</sup>

The performative quality also reflects what feminist scholars have recently viewed as women’s ways of “staging” themselves in autobiography. Ann Cooper Albright writes, “In this new body of literary work, autobiography is treated less as a truthful revelation of the singular inner and private self than as a dramatic staging – a representation – of the public self.”<sup>227</sup> Duncan acknowledged her anxiety about leaving a public record: “I have begun the impossible task of

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<sup>224</sup> Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (New York: Liveright, 1927).

<sup>225</sup> Her literary agent recommended that she have a secretary to facilitate this dictation: “Realizing that it was going to be uphill work for her, [William Bradley] proposed a regular monthly stipend, which was thought sufficient to cover her own personal expenses and a secretary’s salary.” (Kurth, 534)

<sup>226</sup> Macdougall, 5.

<sup>227</sup> Ann Cooper Albright, “Auto-Body Stories: Blondell Commings and Autobiography in Dance” in *Bodies in Motion*, edited by Jane Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 185.

putting this record of my life on paper, and will go on with it to the end, although I can already hear the voices of all the so-called good women of the world saying: 'A most disgraceful history.'"<sup>228</sup> Albright contends, "Duncan's autobiography reveals the very real tensions between her need to justify her work to a society which she feels has misunderstood her art and her desire to share the experience of creative momentum which sponsored her dancing."<sup>229</sup>

Duncan was concerned not only with how she would be perceived by others but also with how she could perceive herself. At the beginning of *My Life*, she wrote: "How can we write the truth about ourselves? Do we even know it? There is the vision our friends have of us; the vision we have of ourselves; and the vision our lover has of us. Also the vision our enemies have of us. And all these visions are different . . ." <sup>230</sup> She acknowledged the inherent difficulties not only in identifying herself but also in locating her life: "To write of what one has actually experienced in words, is to find that they become most evasive. Memories are less tangible than dreams."<sup>231</sup> Through these disclaimers, Duncan acknowledged the performative aspect of her memoir in that it was based on her memories and her interpretation of herself. She was thus free to present herself and her life as she saw fit. Allan Ross Macdougall wrote, "Reasons for certain acts could always be unconsciously glorified later by lofty motives never even vaguely thought of at the moment of their happening, or they could be minimized into insignificance if necessary."<sup>232</sup> Thus Duncan's autobiography may be viewed as her opportunity to publicly display herself as she wanted to be remembered – in opposition to or even in conscious acknowledgment of images of her that had already been presented.

Embracing the performative quality of her autobiography, she used the autobiography to

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<sup>228</sup> *My Life*, 231.

<sup>229</sup> Albright, "Auto-Body Stories," 183-184.

<sup>230</sup> *My Life*, 7-8.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>232</sup> Macdougall, 8.

outline her reasons for her eventual move to Soviet Russia. The early part of her autobiography lays out the economic struggles of her early years, showing the limitations of the existing family system for women dependent upon it. She depicts a less than financially stable childhood characterized by a “nomadic existence,” moving from house to house when her family could not pay the rent. She describes using her “wiles” to get mutton chops from the butcher on credit and peddling knitwear her mother had been unable to sell to a shop:

I remember once, when I was quite a baby, finding my mother weeping over some things which she had knitted for a shop and which had been refused. I took the basket from her, and, putting one of the knitted caps on my head and a pair of knitted mittens on my hands, I went from door to door and peddled them. I sold everything and brought home twice the money mother would have received from the shop.<sup>233</sup>

Duncan had written this section of story three years earlier, just after her departure from Russia, in a piece of manuscript quoted by Allan Ross Macdougall and Irma Duncan:

I remember coming in one day and finding mother crying on the bed and sobbing her heart out.

About her were lying all the knitted things of a week’s work, which she had not been able to sell at the stores. A sudden revolt possessed me. I decided I would sell these things for mother and at a good price. I put on one of little red knitted capes and caps, and with the rest in a basket I set forth. From house to house I peddled my wares. Some people were kind, others rude. On the whole I had success, but it was the first awakening in my childish breast of the monstrous injustice of the world. And that little red knitted cap that my mother had made was the cap of a baby Bolshevik.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> *My Life*, 21.

<sup>234</sup> Duncan and Macdougall, 232-233.

Between the 1924 version and the 1927 version, her revolutionary language was toned down. Whether it was Duncan or her publishers who toned it down, it is likely that the goal of this tempering was to increase the acceptance of the text among Western audiences. Jenny Bradley recalled Duncan's concern that writing about her years in the Soviet Russia would not only fail to appeal to an American audience but also be censored.<sup>235</sup>

In her 1924 manuscript, Duncan directly relates her financially precarious upbringing with her later endeavors: "The state in which we lived, continually hunted [by debt collectors], had seemed to me the normal thing. I think that is why I have worked in the interest of government feeding and education and general welfare of children."<sup>236</sup> But in her autobiography, this incident demonstrates that she is the most "courageous" and "adventurous" in her family. In *My Life*, she is no longer a caped crusader against injustice, wearing the "cap of a baby Bolshevik." Although the explicit socialist language is diluted through the shift in focus from government support through Bolshevism to individual achievement, the underlying sentiment remains: the failure of the existing social and economic system for her family.

The anecdote – both in 1924 and in 1927 – relates in particular the problems of capitalism for women, as shown in the portrayal of her mother. In her 1924 manuscript, Duncan's mother is the remnant of an earlier time: "young and beautiful, but cursed with the narrow bourgeois principals [sic], she did not know how to use either her Youth or Beauty or indomitable intelligence or strength. She was in the prison house of the days before the Emancipation of Women. Sentimental and virtuous, she could only suffer and weep."<sup>237</sup> But in 1927, her mother has a "heroic and adventurous spirit."<sup>238</sup> Instead of being driven by a need to make up for her mother's inaction, Duncan describes herself as inspired by her mother: "My

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<sup>235</sup> Kurth, 538.

<sup>236</sup> Duncan and Macdougall, 231.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>238</sup> *My Life*, 22.

mother cared nothing for material things, and she taught us a fine scorn and contempt for all such possessions as houses, furniture, belongings of all kinds. It was owing to her example that I have never worn a jewel in my life.”<sup>239</sup> In both cases, her mother demonstrates the problem of capitalism as an institution difficult for a woman to engage in. But in the 1927 version, Duncan provides an empowering alternative for her mother: anti-materialism. Rather than being a passive victim due to her bourgeois upbringing, her mother is actively antimaterialist and anti-rich.

Even as Duncan expresses her disdain of the market system, she also describes how she negotiated it. Her door-to-door mitten peddling is described as a brief enterprise, but developing a school is cast as a lifelong one:

When I was about six years old, my mother came home one day and found that I had collected half a dozen babies of the neighbourhood – all of them too young to walk – and had them sitting before me on the floor while I was teaching them to wave their arms. . . . Later on, little girls of the neighborhood came, and their parents paid me a small sum to teach them. This was the beginning of what afterwards proved a very lucrative occupation.<sup>240</sup>

She explains that the financial reward of dancing prompted her to devote herself to it: “When I was ten years old the classes were so large that I informed my mother that it was useless for me to go to school any more, as it was only a waste of time when I could be making money, which I considered far more important.”<sup>241</sup>

Her early interest in making money is juxtaposed with a disdain for those she makes money from. Anti-rich feelings arise throughout her autobiography, as she expresses pride in the

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<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

hardships she endured:

When I hear fathers of families saying they are working to leave a lot of money for their children, I wonder if they realize that by so doing they are taking all the spirit of adventure from the lives of those children. For every dollar they leave them makes them so much the weaker.

The finest inheritance you can give to a child is to allow it to make its own way, completely on its own feet. Our teaching led my sister (and me) into the richest houses in San Francisco. I did not envy these rich children; on the contrary, I pitied them. I was amazed at the smallness and stupidity of their lives.<sup>242</sup>

*My Life* contrasts the “smallness and stupidity” of the lives of the rich with the richness of the lives of the people she met in “Bohemia” when she moved east to Chicago. These “artists and literary people” were “the most extraordinary people I have ever met,” yet “They seemed to have one thing in common: they were without a cent.”<sup>243</sup> Thus she describes how her experiences of youth set her up for a world in which a materially rich life was empty but a materially poor life offered wealth of a different sort.

Duncan repeats similar sentiments throughout her autobiography, insulting those she relied on for her livelihood. She recounts that she moved from Chicago to New York, where she danced for society women in New York City and Newport: Astors, Vanderbilts, Belmonts, and Fishes, women of great means who she reports were “so enwrapped in snobbishness and the glory of being rich that they had no art sense whatever.”<sup>244</sup> Duncan writes that she was frequently underpaid for her performances: “these ladies were so economical of their cachets

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<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

that we hardly made enough to pay the trip and our board.”<sup>245</sup> Frustrations with her audience and her financial struggles forced her to expatriate, she explains: “. . . my experiences when dancing before the smart set at Newport, and the New York Four Hundred, had left me in a state of bitter disillusionment. I felt that if this was all the response America had to make, it was useless to knock any longer upon a door so closely shut, before so cold an audience. My great desire was to reach London.”<sup>246</sup> She expresses disdain for the wealthy for their lack of appreciation of her art and for their stinginess, which she contrasts with her own Robin Hood-like magnanimous nature. She writes that a “possessor of about sixty million dollars” lent her fifty dollars to get to England with the stipulation that “When you make money, you will send this back,” but Duncan ignored her wishes: “I never sent it back, preferring rather to give it to the poor.”<sup>247</sup>

In describing her travels to London and her early experiences in London, she continues to emphasize her dismal material existence, which she contrasts not only to the richness of her experiences but also to the wealthy life she eventually attained. Duncan describes her family’s struggles upon their arrival in London: “If we could see a psychical cinematograph of our own lives would we not be amazed, and exclaim: ‘Surely that did not happen to me?’ Certainly the four people I remember walking about the streets of London might just as well have existed in the imagination of Charles Dickens, and at the present moment I can scarcely believe in their reality.”<sup>248</sup> According to Macdougall, Duncan exaggerated the story of her family’s arrival in London; she had previously been to London, where she had made connections that would have allowed her entree into society: “Although Isadora in her later years was wont to romantically exaggerate the hardships of her early days in London and struggles of Clan Duncan against a

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 41.



harsh and unfeeling world, the family was not so alone or unaided as she later recounted.”<sup>249</sup> Her acquaintances in London included her former New York society ‘patronesses as well as her former dancing teacher, Ketti Lanner. She also had “the usual letters of introduction, the practical value of which her first stay in Chicago and subsequent career in New York and Newport had taught her.”<sup>250</sup> In denying these connections, Duncan appears to stress the hardships of her youth to contrast them with the heights she eventually reached and to set up her empathy with the struggling classes. Of the rough passage to England, Duncan writes, “I have often thought of that voyage on the cattle-boat when I have been in my luxurious cabin on one of the big liners, and of our irrepressible merriment and delight, and I have wondered if after all a continual atmosphere of luxury does not cause neurasthenia.”<sup>251</sup>

The theme of the emptiness of the rich and the potential richness of the poor continues throughout her autobiography, as she documents a shift away from performing for rich society and toward embracing democratic ideals regarding dance and education. She notes that she initially avoided audiences beyond elites and artists, fearing the commercial connotations of a large audience. Ann Daly writes, “Ever since her earlier society appearances in New York and Newport, Duncan had aligned herself with the elite – whether artists, celebrities, royalty, or the Four Hundred[.]”<sup>252</sup> Duncan recounts that early in her time in Europe, despite a financially precarious situation, she refused an impresario’s offer for her to dance in a music hall: “I shouted at him that I had come to Europe to bring about a great renaissance of religion through the Dance . . . not to dance for the amusement of overfed bourgeoisie after dinner.”<sup>253</sup> And she describes her objection to an invitation to dance in a theater in Budapest: “My dancing is for the elite, for

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<sup>249</sup> Macdougall, 52.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> *My Life*, 40.

<sup>252</sup> Daly, *Done into Dance*, 112.

<sup>253</sup> *My Life*, 65.

the artists, sculptors, painters, musicians, but not for the general public.”<sup>254</sup>

But Duncan insists that her opinion soon changed. Alexander Gross, the impresario who invited her to Budapest, “protested that the artists were the most critical audience, and if they liked my dancing the public would like it a hundred times more.” She continues, “I was persuaded to sign the contract, and the prophesy of Alexander Gross was fulfilled. The first night at the Urania Theatre was an indescribable triumph. For thirty nights I dance in Budapest to a sold-out house.”<sup>255</sup> She describes that in expanding her focus from elites and artists, she found not only a new potential audience but also new sources of inspiration. She writes, “Is there any music like this – the gypsy music springing from the soil of Hungary? . . . Of all these finely constructed machines – products of skilled inventors – none could replace the gypsy music of a single Hungarian peasant playing on the dusty roads of Hungary.”<sup>256</sup> She recounts that after dancing to a gypsy song, she “ended with the Rakowsky March, which, in my red tunic, I danced as a Revolutionary Hymn to the Heroes of Hungary.”<sup>257</sup> These new influences represented a new direction for her, away from her earlier appeals to the elite and toward an empathy with a different class of people and an allegiance with revolutionaries that foreshadows her move to Soviet Russia.

Although she acknowledges that her early efforts appealed to the rich, she aligns her interests with art and authenticity rather than with wealth. Thus she not only notes inspirations such as Gypsy music, but she also casts her Hellenist influence and interest in Greece as spiritual rather than elitist. When she explains why she and her family interrupted her busy performing season to visit Greece, she writes, “One might wonder why, at that time, after the public success that I had had, and after my passionate interlude in Budapest, I should have felt no longing to go

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<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>256</sup> *My Life*, 74-75.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

back to either. The truth is that, when I had started on this pilgrimage, I had not had either the desire for fame nor for making money.”<sup>258</sup> Describing a performance in Greece, she continues to separate herself from the moneyed and the elite; she writes, “the performance given before the Royal Family and all the embassies of Athens in the Royal Theatre lacked all the fire and enthusiasm of that in the popular theatre for the students. The applause of the white-kid-gloved hands was not inspiring.”<sup>259</sup>

Duncan expands upon her disconnect with the rich in her description of her relationship with Paris Singer, who helped her open her school in Bellevue, France, and who fathered her second child, Patrick. She describes Singer’s sadness: “All money brings a curse with it, and the people who possess it cannot be happy for twenty-four hours.”<sup>260</sup> She compares the emptiness of the life she experienced with Singer with the authentic experience she had growing up: “Sometimes I contrasted unfavourably the ease of this life of luxury, the continual feasting, the nonchalant giving up of one’s being to pleasure, with the bitter struggle of my early youth.”<sup>261</sup> To her, the lifestyle of the rich lacks purpose and productivity: “I realised that riches and luxury do not create contentment! It is certainly more difficult for rich people to accomplish anything serious in life. Always that yacht in the harbour inviting one to sail on Azure Seas.”<sup>262</sup> The occasion of writing her autobiography was not the first time she had expressed such a sentiment. Victor Seroff recalled that Duncan prefaced a similar statement by saying, “Just imagine how degrading it must be to be identified, not with yourself as a person, with what you have done or are doing, but with your signature on a check.”<sup>263</sup> To Duncan, wealth overshadowed greater

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>263</sup> Seroff, 145.

accomplishments in defining identity. She writes, “Don’t you see that when I asked him, ‘What will we do when we get married?’ he didn’t have the faintest idea what I meant, and he never seemed to understand that for a creative person ‘doing something’ was living, was breathing.”<sup>264</sup>

She maligns the rich for looking to others for productivity rather than being productive themselves: “And suddenly I realized that his vision of America was of the dozens of factories which made his fortune for him.”<sup>265</sup> This anti-capitalist statement repeats sentiments expressed earlier in her autobiography that link capitalist society with a loss of “spiritual power and grace”: “When these children grew older the counteracting influences of our materialistic civilization took this force from them – and they lost their inspiration.”<sup>266</sup> She contrasts Singer’s ideals with her own on “Plato’s Republic, Karl Marx, and a general reform of the world.”<sup>267</sup> She describes her eventual move to Soviet Russia as an alternative to the life of the neurasthenic, leisurely capitalist: “No wonder I felt inclined to become a Communist when I so often had exemplified for me the fact that for a rich man to find happiness was like Sisyphus trying to roll his stone uphill from Hell.”<sup>268</sup> Victor Seroff acknowledged the role that Duncan set up for Singer in her autobiography: “The poor man suddenly found himself in the unfavorable position of being rich and therefore responsible for the social injustice in the world.”<sup>269</sup>

Despite the account in her autobiography, idealism was not the only reason for Duncan’s separation from Singer’s world. Duncan treats her breakup with Paris Singer with some lightness in *My Life*, but those who knew her noted that her attitude toward his generosity to her (spurning his offer to make Madison Square Garden available for her efforts) angered him to the point that

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> *My Life*, 168.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>269</sup> Seroff, 141.

he eventually cut her off financially and otherwise. Irma Duncan reported that during her 1917 American tour, “His financial assistance had ceased abruptly, leaving her short of funds. Suddenly she found herself unable to keep up the style she was accustomed to. She gave up her elegant suite at the Ritz and reluctantly moved to a cheaper hotel.”<sup>270</sup> As much as she might have liked to – and as much as she might have tried to portray her life otherwise – she could not escape or avoid the material and financial realities of the world or her inability to live her life independent of others.

Her quest to fund her school drives much of the action of her autobiography. She documents her many tours and attempts to find patrons in Germany, England, and the United States. She explains that before she met Singer, frustrated with her inability to find patrons and her reliance upon touring, she sought support from a government:

It became more and more difficult to meet the expenses of the school, so I conceived the idea of taking them with me to different countries, in order to seek if there were a single Government which would recognise the beauty of this education for children and give me the chance I needed to experiment with my project on a larger scale.

At the end of each performance, I made an appeal to the public for help to find some way of giving to others, from my own life, the discovery I had made, and which might liberate and illumine the lives of thousands.<sup>271</sup>

She documents her quest for support from Germany, England, and the United States, as well as pre-revolutionary Russia: “Although the public received with enthusiasm my pleading for a renaissance of the real dance, the Imperial Ballet was too firmly rooted in Russia to make any change possible.”<sup>272</sup> She links the constraints of ballet with the those of the tsarist regime: “I

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<sup>270</sup> Irma Duncan, 157.

<sup>271</sup> *My Life*, 154.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

took my little pupils to witness the training of the children of the Ballet School. These latter looked at them as canary birds in a cage might view the circling swallows in the air. But the day had not yet come for a school of free human movement.”<sup>273</sup> Only with the fall of the tsarist regime could Russia offer the freedom required for her school.

Compounded with the poverty of her childhood and the superficiality of the rich she documents, her description of her earnest efforts to find funding from capitalist and imperialist sources reinforce the reasons she moved to Soviet Russia. She foreshadows her final departure for Russia midway through her autobiography. She attributes her empathy for the masses to a delayed train that caused her to see the funeral procession of those killed on Bloody Sunday:

If I had never seen it, all my life would have been different. There, before this seemingly endless procession, this tragedy, I vowed myself and my forces to the service of the people and the down-trodden. . . I mounted to my palatial rooms and slipped into the quiet bed, where I cried myself to sleep. But the pity, the despairing rage of that dawn was to bear fruit in my life hereafter.<sup>274</sup>

She weeps for the “down-trodden,” but she does so from her “palatial” room, where it’s doubtful she identified with them. When she danced two nights later “before the elite of St. Petersburg society,” she notes that her “soul that wept with righteous anger, thinking of the martyrs of that funeral procession of the dawn; this soul awakened in that wealthy, spoiled, and aristocratic audience a response of stirring applause. How curious!”<sup>275</sup> The juxtaposition of her sympathy for the masses with indications of her privileged position points to the complex economic and class identity she displays throughout her autobiography and displayed throughout her life. Her sympathy for the masses is in part based on her sense of social injustice, but it is also predicated

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

on her distance from their reality.

Although she attributes her burgeoning advocacy for the “down-trodden” to the missed train, it is unlikely that this event occurred as she wrote it. According to Allan Ross Macdougall, the dates of the procession don’t match the dates of her visit. Victor Seroff also noted discrepancies in her depiction of this visit to Russia: “Among her new acquaintances, the upper class of Russian society and the artists, she did not have the slightest chance of meeting a revolutionary. In those circles, if she heard any reference at all to ‘Bloody Sunday,’ it would have been interpreted by the staunch supporters of absolute monarchy . . . It goes without saying that her performances were for the aristocratic spectrum of Russian society and not for the working class.”<sup>276</sup> But her portrayal of the sight of the procession as an “extraordinary” event in her life exemplifies the way she uses her autobiography to describe her empathy for the masses. Seroff wrote, “This passage was written in retrospect, over twenty years later and represents an attitude she arrived at only later.”<sup>277</sup>

Having laid out the experiences and ideals that turned her against capitalism, in the second half of her autobiography, she emphasizes that her art was for the masses, who could benefit from her dance:

Beethoven and Schubert were children of the people all their lives. They were poor men, and their great work was inspired by and belonging to humanity. The people need great drama, music, dancing . . . Give art to the people who need it. Great music should no longer be kept for the delight of a few cultured people, it should be given free to the masses; it is as necessary for them as air and bread, for it is the spiritual wine of humanity.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Seroff, 84.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> *My Life*, 181-182.

Describing her 1914 tour of the United States, after the outbreak of World War I shut down her Bellevue school, she stresses her shift in focus from the elite to the masses:

My audience consisted mostly of people from the East Side who, by the way, are among the real lovers of Art in America to-day. The appreciation of the East Side so touched me that I went over there with my entire school and an orchestra, and gave a free performance in the Yiddish Theatre, and, if I had had the means, I would have remained there dancing for these people whose very soul is made for music and poetry. But alas! this great venture of mine proved a costly experiment, and landed me in complete bankruptcy. Appealing to some of New York's millionaires, I only received the answer: "But why do you wish to give representations of Greek tragedy?"<sup>279</sup>

Describing her tour of the United States in 1917, she again emphasizes her revolutionary empathy for the lower classes, now more specifically figured as the Russian serf: "On the day of the announcement of the Russian Revolution all lovers of freedom were filled with hopeful joy, and that night I danced the 'Marseillaise' in the real original revolutionary spirit in which it was composed, and followed it with my interpretation of the 'Marche Slav,' in which appears the Hymn to the Tsar, and I pictured the downtrodden serf under the lash of the whip."<sup>280</sup> She writes that this revolutionary dance realized a theme that had always underlay her work: "It is strange that in all my Art career it has been these movements of despair and revolt that have most attracted me. In my red tunic I have constantly danced the Revolution and the call to arms of the oppressed."<sup>281</sup>

After relaying her frustrations with capitalism and describing the realization of the revolutionary spirit she had built up to throughout *My Life*, she compresses the period between

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 226-227.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.



the end of the war and her departure for the Soviet Union in 1921 into just a few pages. Irma Duncan and Allan Ross Macdougall reported that she had planned to write a second volume, titled "My Bolshevik Days."<sup>282</sup> In a February 25, 1927, telegram to her publisher, she wrote, "In order to give an adequate idea of my life I see that the entire book will take at least three hundred thousand words, and would suggest having it published in two volumes. First: Memoirs of Youth. Second: Maturity."<sup>283</sup>

Duncan describes receiving her invitation to open a school in Soviet Russia in 1921: "With all the energy of my being, disappointed in the attempts to realise any of my Art visions in Europe, I was ready to enter the ideal domain of Communism. . . . As the boat proceeded northwards, I looked back with contempt and pity at all the old institutions and habits of bourgeois Europe that I was leaving."<sup>284</sup> But even as she writes that she bid, "Adieu, Old World!" and looked to "hail a New World," she recalls her departure with the benefit of hindsight:

I thought I had left all the forms of European life behind me for ever. I actually believed the ideal State, such as Plato, Karl Marx, and Lenin had dreamed it, had now by some miracle been created on earth . . . I brought no dresses along; I pictured myself spending the rest of my life in a red flannel blouse among comrades equally simply dressed and filled with brotherly love.<sup>285</sup>

Her escape from "the inequality, injustice, and the brutality" of the capitalist world is mitigated by the foreshadowing the failure of the "glorious promise" of the "New World," which

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<sup>282</sup> "She told her friend that it was in her mind to write a book called 'My Bolshevik Days,' but first she must write up the memories of the years preceding her Russian days." (Duncan and Macdougall, 302)

<sup>283</sup> Kurth, 538.

<sup>284</sup> *My Life*, 255.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*

ultimately also did not follow through on its promise for her school. When Lenin rolled out his New Economic Policy, the Soviet government informed her that she could now tour to raise money for her school. She was right back where she started.

Isadora Duncan's autobiography, written out of both necessity and idealism, demonstrates her frustration with and eventual rejection of the capitalist world. In her life, she railed against the rich, and she championed the poor, but she also lived a luxurious lifestyle, outside of her means. She seemed to feel entitled to the trappings of a luxury life and resented having to pay for her luxuries. Her behavior suggests a woman conflicted about the role of money and confused about her place in the class structure. Her conflicted emotions are apparent in her autobiography. Max Eastman wrote, "As you read her own story of her life, you see the habit of self-destruction – of challenging fate to destroy her – beginning long before that [the death of her children]. From early youth she loved nothing better than to 'spend her last cent' in some purely, and never mind how shallowly, aesthetic extravagance."<sup>286</sup> Duncan spends the first half of *My Life* describing her attempts to find success, her nomadic lifestyle and dance career motivated by monetary concerns. Yet she also criticizes the wealthy society women who sponsored her early career and funded her move to Europe. Without these benefactresses, her career likely would not have achieved the heights it did. But with her success in this market gone, she turns on these women, publicizing their stinginess, their lack of charity, and their lack of art. In the second half of *My Life*, she describes her entrance into the world of the wealthy through her relationship with Paris Singer. In depicting this world, she portrays the conflicting draws of two lifestyles: the creative life of the artist and the luxurious life of the wealthy.

Duncan embraced the performative potential of her autobiography to emphasize herself as an artist trying to negotiate the market. She had used her art to emerge from the lower class only to find herself in a capitalist world with no system in place to sustain the artist, so she

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<sup>286</sup> Eastman, *Heroes I Have Known*, 84.

moved to a system that supported the artist. When that world also failed to deliver on its promises to her, she was left to defend her actions. Through her autobiography, she could act out an idealization of her life according to a strategy that best suited her needs. Her needs in the case of writing her autobiography may be best understood in economic terms: she needed to earn money, and she needed to set the story straight about her needs for money. Through writing her autobiography, Duncan reconciled and defended her life vis-à-vis class and capitalism by outlining the reasons for and inevitability of her eventual departure for Soviet Russia.

“The real American is not a gold chaser or money lover, as the legend classes him, but an idealist and a mystic.”<sup>287</sup>

## Conclusion

This thesis explored Isadora Duncan from the perspective of her economic motivations and relationship to commercialism, class, and capitalism. Like other artists in the late nineteenth century, Duncan drew from capital available to her as a woman to establish herself professionally. Through dance, Duncan used her body as a medium to navigate and negotiate the market system she was born into. But creating a profession using her body and needing to earn money compromised her respectability, so she downplayed her financial motivations to associate herself with artistic and intellectual movements and to distance herself from commercial movements of theater. This dual need to make money and tendency to dismiss the importance of money continued later in her life in various forms. Concerned that commercial success indicated artistic failure, she at first marketed herself to the upper classes, and then, stumbling in that venture, allied herself with the lower classes. Both the upper class’s consumption of her and her subsequent consumption of the working classes further distanced her from both groups.

Throughout her life, Duncan claimed allegiance with artists who prioritized art over commerce. She viewed herself, her dance, and her school as productive in the sense that they offered cultural, intellectual, and spiritual contributions to society, and she claimed to represent other ill-paid producers – laborers. In 1917, she said, “I have been trying for twelve years to get someone to support my School here. I have devoted all that I have made to this cause. I have no capital. I don’t believe that people should have capital. Their worth should be in themselves.”<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> *My Life*, 61.

<sup>288</sup> *Isadora Speaks*, 120.

Finding private funding options unreliable and frustrated by her continual need to tour to support herself and her school, she sought state funding for her art. Though Soviet Russia was not stable enough to make good on its financial promises to her, state support nevertheless appealed to her as offering the potential to allow her to focus her efforts away from making money. As William Bolitho wrote, “She wanted no husband to look after her, support her, feed her. She was quite convinced that someone should. That someone, when she learnt the vocabulary, was the State.”<sup>289</sup>

As pointed out by Fredrika Blair among others, Duncan’s dances were among the earliest dances of social protest, which were carried on in the 1920s and 1930s by dancers such as Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham.<sup>290</sup> Elizabeth Cooper writes that “In the 1930s New York abounded with modern dance groups invested in portraying social injustice, oppression and class struggle. In many cases, the choreography was infused with Marxist ideology. The so-called ‘revolutionary’ dancers hoped their presentations would raise class consciousness among the masses of workers and unemployed. They called for mass action in changing social conditions.”<sup>291</sup> But it was not only dances of social protest that the dancers of the 1930s shared with Isadora Duncan. They also shared her interest in government support: “The Federal Dance Project, . . . a part of the New Deal’s Federal Theater Project, subsidized dance employment in the period of the Depression and gave many emerging choreographers government sponsorship for interesting, sometimes revolutionary, work, of a kind for which Isadora had so long pleaded . . . . These artists . . . gave credit to Isadora as inspiration for freedom in the dance and as a propagandist for popular support – and even government support – of the arts.”<sup>292</sup>

A dancer with far less name recognition today than Isadora Duncan, Helen Tamiris

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<sup>289</sup> Bolitho, 311.

<sup>290</sup> Blair, 297.

<sup>291</sup> Elizabeth Cooper, “Tamiris and the Federal Dance Theatre 1936-1939: Socially Relevant Dance Amidst the Policies and Politics of the New Deal Era,” *Dance Research Journal* 2, no. 29 (Autumn 1997), 37.

<sup>292</sup> Seroff, 113.

succeeded where Duncan failed: obtaining the U.S. government's support of dance. Also from a "poor but cultured family,"<sup>293</sup> Tamiris headed the Federal Dance Project in the 1930s. Like Duncan, Tamiris was "inspired by the notion of bringing dance to the masses."<sup>294</sup> Although she "did not make it her mission to speak solely to, or for, the working class" nor did she "preach Marxist ideology nor champion the Communist Party," Tamiris "wanted to create a viable means to sustain dancers through the economic crisis of the 1930s and to bring 'socially relevant' modern dance to new audiences."<sup>295</sup> In a program from January 29, 1938, Tamiris wrote, "Art is international, but the artist is a product of nationality and his principal duty to himself is to express the spirit of his race . . . The dance of today must have a dynamic tempo and be valid, precise, spontaneous, free, normal, natural and human."<sup>296</sup> Tamiris recognized Duncan's influence on her teaching, "In all of my teaching . . . I go back to Duncan's philosophic point of view."<sup>297</sup> Accusations of "shameful political agitation" plagued the Federal Dance Project, and accusations of communism ultimately shut down both the Federal Dance Project and its umbrella organization, the Federal Theatre Project.<sup>298</sup> Yet Tamiris continued to share Duncan's belief of the integrity of dance and the importance of government support. Tamiris said, "We must not relapse into making 'dance conscious' dances, but face the open road of further development, taking into consideration the world we live in, and maintaining that the dancer, because of his usefulness to society, is entitled to its support and to his right to fight for it."<sup>299</sup>

Thus Isadora Duncan's legacy lies not only in being a dance innovator and modern woman but also in being an early advocate of state funding for the arts, so artists may devote

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<sup>293</sup> Pauline Tish, "Remembering Helen Tamiris," *Dance Chronicle* 17, No. 3 (1994), 327

<sup>294</sup> Cooper, 23.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>297</sup> Tish, 332-333.

<sup>298</sup> Cooper, 39 and 41.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

themselves to creative production outside the commercial realm. The Public Works of Art Project, the first United States government art program, was established in 1933, six years after Isadora Duncan's death. The situation facing artists in 1933 echoed on a larger scale the individual challenges Duncan faced in finding patronage from private sources: "The first Federal government art program was a direct product of the 1929 Depression, which by 1933 resulted in the unemployment of over 10,000,000 Americans. The group of artists, their economic status at best precarious, had suffered especially, due to the dwindling of normal private patronage."<sup>300</sup>

Duncan considered art a valuable investment for a government hoping to build a stronger class of citizens. Her arguments for state-supported arts education and funding resembled the opinions of those who lobbied for and implemented programs such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA)'s Federal Art Project and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). WPA director Harry Hopkins "insisted that workers in the arts – painters, musicians, writers, actors, and other artists – were as deserving of support as workers with other skills."<sup>301</sup> In the 1960s, Congress established the NEA, which not only shares with Isadora Duncan the belief that "a great nation deserves great art" but also included dance as among its initial six programs.<sup>302</sup>

Peg Zeglin Brand writes that "The agency of dancing women is particularly acute when compared to other groups within the visual arts, particularly the areas of painting or sculpture."<sup>303</sup> Brand argues that "Given the imbalance in numbers between women in dance and art, dancing women have much to teach feminist scholars in art history, aesthetics, and political theory about the import of their creative work and how the politics of dance informs gender representation *and*

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<sup>300</sup> Erica Beckh, "Government Art in the Roosevelt Era: An Appraisal of Federal Art Patronage in the Light of Present Needs," *Art Journal* 20, no. 1 (Autumn 1960): 3.

<sup>301</sup> Cooper, 26.

<sup>302</sup> *National Endowment for the Arts, 1965-2000: A Brief Chronology of Federal Support for the Arts*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Communications, National Endowment for the Arts, 2000.

<sup>303</sup> Peg Zeglin Brand, "Review: Bodies, Agency, and Beauvoir," *Dance Research Journal*, 31, no. 2 (Autumn 1999): 115.

construction within larger contexts of culture and patriarchy.”<sup>304</sup> In her vision of dance as worthy of government funding, Duncan not only promoted dance as a meaningful discipline but also advocated for the state to take an active role in the arts. Duncan’s strong arguments for government-supported art and art education – beliefs she arrived at after a life of commercial tension and economic strain – offer another way that dance studies might be enlightening in a study of economic and artistic endeavors in this country. She used the opportunities she had to produce creatively, and failing to find support from private funding, she sought government support. What she argued for was achieved after her death when the difficult economic conditions she dealt with individually expanded to nation-wide proportions. Facing our own crisis of capitalism, we may discover similar opportunities to redefine productivity, reevaluate the importance of creativity for a nation, and reconsider the role of government in our ventures.

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<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 116.



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