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## **Re-Visioning the Modern/ist Body: Literature, Women, and Modern Dance**

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Marisa Higgins entitled "Re-Visioning the Modern/ist Body: Literature, Women, and Modern Dance." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Dr. Stan Garner, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Dr. Misty Anderson, Dr. Bill Hardwig, Dr. Casey Sams

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

**RE-VISIONING THE MODERN/IST BODY: LITERATURE, WOMEN, AND  
MODERN DANCE**

A Dissertation Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Marisa D. Higgins

August 2022

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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To the woman who gave me my love for dance. You did what you could to give us a better life, Mom.

To the woman who raised me, who gave me my love for stories. I miss our lunch dates and our phone calls. Thank you for giving me hope, and a desire to learn and dream and

adventure. I wish you were here for this finale, Grandma. To Judith Ann Westfall (March 13, 1946-February 17, 2017).

## ABSTRACT

This project explores the connections between modern dance and modernism. Though initially, these connections might seem inchoate, modern dance provides a way to consider how expressive movement in modernism and gender restrictions prompts a physical response. Dance is inherently stylistic movement, and it is vital to explore how movement offers women a way to engage or respond to modernity. By investigating the role of movement in modernist literature and the particular tension between constraint and freedom that characterized female movement during this period, I argue that expressive movement and embodied performance offers a means of self-exploration and self-actualization. Specifically, it addresses the ways in which the work of Martha Graham is at the heart of this project, running as a thread that connects the intricacies of women's autonomy, movement, and experience; this performance also conveys how the limited connection between modern dance and modernism allows the dance style, as a form of embodied performance, to be viewed as a form of expressive movement that coalesces and generates other dance styles that are reflective of modernism and its other various artforms. My introduction situates this project's relevance in the fields of modernist studies and modern dance, which leads into my discussion of historicizing modern dance and elaborating on the artform's lineage. Chapter Two explores how women's movement is constrained, yet insurrectionary using Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*. In Chapter Three, I extend my discussion on constraint and liberated movement based on the life and work of Zelda Fitzgerald, primarily focusing on her only novel *Save Me the Waltz*. Lastly, Chapter Four elaborates on my previous discussions by

articulating how the intersection between racial identity and expressive movement are present in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* as well as the dance stylings of Josephine Baker.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>INTRODUCTION</i> .....	<i>1</i>
<i>CHAPTER ONE</i> .....	<i>19</i>
<i>CHAPTER TWO</i> .....	<i>46</i>
<i>CHAPTER THREE</i> .....	<i>74</i>
<i>CHAPTER FOUR</i> .....	<i>101</i>
<i>CONCLUSION</i> .....	<i>139</i>
<i>BIBLIOGRAPHY</i> .....	<i>143</i>
<i>VITA</i> .....	<i>156</i>

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Martha Graham, Clytemnestra .....	12
Figure 2: Boxes from "Understanding and Undoing Racism" .....	110

## INTRODUCTION

In August 2019, the Martha Graham Dance Company (MGDC) performed *19 Poses*, and as the title suggests, the performance is a conglomeration of nineteen poses that are reflective of Graham's various choreographed dance performances. The company also collected poses from specific moments in a variety of Graham's choreographed numbers, creating an interactive digital project. *19 Poses* is a celebration of the centennial of the 19th Amendment, and in its heralding of the women's suffrage movement and women's right to vote, this performance piece is a reminder of how modern dance was a women-led and women-dominated artform. Though *19 Poses* is a celebration of the 19th Amendment and suffrage, this performance is also inherently a commemoration of Martha Graham, her contributions to dance, and her repertoire of choreography. Martha Graham, though one of many modern dance pioneers of her time, exemplifies the intersection of the body politic and embodied performance, cultivating a kinesthetic language that reifies women's rights and freedom.

Inspired by Martha Graham's stylistic innovations and the recent *19 Poses* performance, this dissertation seeks to explore how modern dance, specifically via the work of Martha Graham, has given language to a form of movement that encapsulates a distinctly feminine corporeal expression. Through this kinesthetic language, I intend to draw connections between embodied performance and modernist literature, considering how Graham's vocabulary of movement establishes a body politic that encompasses a specifically modern response. By investigating how modernist literature can be read through the language of modern dance—its technique and terminology and its attitude

towards the female body—this project will explore the necessity of a gendered and embodied modernism. As modern dance offered women a form of corporeal expression in which they could both speak/write with their bodies, a way to cultivate and establish a kinesthetic language, the vocabulary created and implemented by Martha Graham offers a way to “re-vision” modernist literature through gendered movement and embodied performance.

While Graham’s legacy in the genealogy of modern dance is profound, this dissertation will not be restricted to her influence. Graham did not invent modern dance, nor is she a first-generation modern dance pioneer, as Isadora Duncan, Loie Fuller, and Ruth St. Denis. Moreover, this project also does not intend to suggest that Graham’s modern dance style has had any direct influence on modernist literature—or conversely, that modernist literature, had much of an influence on modern dance. What *19 Poses* offers is a reminder that dance, like literature, is a gendered response to modernity in terms of embodied performance and expressive movement. Using it allows me to position Graham in relation to other dance styles and forms of movement and performance that emerged during the first half of the 1900s.

The physicality of modernism allows for a conversation to exist between modernist culture and modern dance—and the other various dance styles popular during the early twentieth century. While there may be few explicit connections between these cultural forms, the physical response to modernity is encapsulated and reflected in numerous artforms throughout the early twentieth century. In *History of a Shiver: The Sublime Impudence of Modernism*, Jed Rasula elucidates on why modernism is

impossible to talk about without conceiving of the corporeal affect of the era and how bodies experienced this time period—whether through technology, war, fashion, gender, or accessibility. Though conversations about embodiment are not new to the field, they are vital to discussing this particular time period. As Stephen Kerns contends in *The Culture of Time and Space*, bodies were physically responding to the abrupt shift caused in part by technology, industry, and war. Considering the experimentation of modernist literature, the fragmentation of art, and the rise of cinema, which captured and preserved physical bodies in time and space—it is impossible to deny the overlaps between modern dance and modernist literature. The art of modernity is a way to channel, experiment, and perhaps, even to understand and comprehend, the chaos of a quickly advancing era. Though modern dance is merely one dance style that emerged during the early twentieth century, it provides an explicit example of how women pioneered a phenomenon, all while celebrating their bodies' abilities and the newly acquired freedom they found through an innovative performance style. The dance style is a predominantly women-led movement, and amidst a culture of mass change, modern dance, at its core, celebrates self-expression, freedom, femininity, and sexuality with bodily fluidity and style.

Like Rebekah Kowal, I view dance as a cultural practice “that reveal[s] an emerging progressive body politic” (6). Kowal, adopting Raymond Williams’ “structures of feeling,” writes in *How to Do Things With Dance: Performing Change in Postwar America*, that “...expressive practices, like dance, are often the first signs of cultural change, comprehensible but inchoate indications of a surfacing zeitgeist or mentalité” (6). As Kowal demonstrates, dancing bodies become “agents of change,” and this notion

accentuates the value of examining modern dance as a women-led phenomenon that works in conjunction with women's artistic freedom. If modern dance is populated by women who use their bodies and performance to ignite a subversive new dance style, I think this appreciation and reverence can also be applied to how modernist literature is read. The embodied performance of modern dance accentuates and displays the uncertainty and vast change of modernity, but it also privileges women's bodies as powerful and subversive—but most importantly, *present*. This same approach can be used to read modernist literature; it gives perspective and a new language to understand the women writers and their works, which have been omitted, silenced, ignored, or even simply, less frequently discussed. It is a reminder to the field of modernist studies that women were present during this time period, even if their works have been historically marginalized or excluded from the modernist archive.

While I do not intend to argue that women modern dancers were intrinsic to or definitive of the early feminist movement, I do want to illuminate how the choreography and performances of these women were supplemental and significant in responding to and extending the conversations surrounding modernism and subsequently, women's place and contribution to modernism. As Julia Foulkes suggests in *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey*, myriad definitions of womanhood emerged during this period, yet she emphasizes the importance of bodies as the forefront of this artform. Foulkes writes, "In fact, many modern dancers believed that their art rose above other genres because its source material—bodies—existed prior to words and was thus closer to the raw and basic elements of being that modernist artists

sought to expose” (Foulkes 35). Modern dance encapsulates a response to modernity that is inherently corporeal—and gendered—and it is through the movement of this dance style that a kinesthetic language emerges. Martha Graham writes, “You do not realize how the headlines that make daily history affect the muscles of the human body.” The body, in short, is a locus of interactions, reactions, and events, and in the context of modern dance, “women modern dancers combined the active spirit inflecting new definitions of womanhood with the modernist internal perspective in expressive movement of their own bodies” (Foulkes 35). As Graham suggests, the stresses of modern life had a direct effect on the human body, and to consider how the female body responds to the slow emergence of freedom requires an understanding of how modernity, dance, and the female body function together. The female body and its presence in performance is invaluable to this project, and it illuminates a manner in how we can “re-vision” modernist studies and literature through corporeal movement.

This leads me to a recent conversation in modernist studies. In October 2019, *Modernism/Modernity* published an issue entitled “Modernism and the World Stage,” that calls for a reconsideration of embodied performance in terms of the modernist field. In a supplementary interview to the journal’s issue, Carrie Preston addresses how the field of modernism struggles with a definitional problem: “What is modernism? Is it a style, period, activism?” Though these questions are not easily answerable, Preston insists that performance and embodiment allows a way in which we can reconsider modernism (Preston, interview). Preston’s research primarily deals with performance and dance, and she believes that because modernism is so difficult to define, the field of performance

studies allows for various interpretations and reconsiderations. Essentially, she argues that the field's boundaries are rather obscure, but she does not view this as problematic; rather, she perceives the definitional complexities of modernism as a way for scholars to continue research in the field. As the most recent meeting of the Modernist Studies Association (MSA) also indicated, the complexities of the field in terms of definition are problematic; the MSA 2019 theme was "Upheaval and Reconstruction" and "invite[d] considerations on the processes of upheaval and reconstruction, and prompt[ed] reexaminations of modernism and modernity." Though MSA's theme acknowledged the definitional problems of modernism, the conference also included a panel on "The Future of Modernism," asking scholars to consider how the modernist studies can continue without evaluating its categorization.

Despite Preston's interrogation of the field, Cassandra Laity recognizes that the field has yet to undertake a "full-scale, feminist modernist recovery." As Laity claims, without this investigation into the field, it is impossible to know if modernism has historically been feminist—or even if the field is currently feminist, and in the shift towards gender studies, these conversations are at once outdated and necessary. Though the New Modernist Studies, which emerged in the mid-1990s as a response to the elitist field of scholarship that modernism had become, did undertake issues of feminism and race, Laity still perceives that there are limits without a thorough recovery process. Though my work cannot accomplish this recovery process, I do hope this project sheds light on gendered modernism by using the language of modern dance as a way to understand women's bodily agency as a form of activism. It is nearly impossible, for



instance, to talk about modern dance without viewing it as a reflection of women's suffrage and first-wave feminism. This approach also requires an understanding of the evolution of modern dance and a consideration of the lineage and generations of dancers that shaped the discourse. First-generation modern dancers such as Isadora Duncan and Loie St. Fuller, after all, were performing during the origins of the women's suffrage movement, while the later generations were performing around the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920 and into the thirties and early forties.

Modern dance, as a form of feminist activism and a response to modernity, was simultaneously at the periphery and the center of women obtaining various rights and freedoms during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While this project is timely in consideration of these recent aforementioned conversations in the respective fields of dance studies and modernist studies, this project does not intend to merely rely on or extend these conversations. Rather, I hope to delineate the current limitations and deficiencies of the field by accentuating how the language of a women-pioneered movement offers a way to envision how modernist literature is embodied. This project also builds on recent studies of embodiment in modernism. Using the language of Martha Graham's modern dance, I postulate that it is through a strictly gendered corporeal language of movement that modernist literature can be revised.

However, despite the fact that modern dance is predominantly a women-led movement, it is impossible to ignore how modernist literature is intrinsically a male-dominated field. In its inception, modernism excluded women, and even a century later, the process of recovery—or in the words of Adrienne Rich, the “re-vision” process—has

continued to omit a number of women authors who were writing and/or published during the modernist era. Considering this blatant omission and dismissal, it is vital to “re-enter a diversely defined modernism through a feminist/gendered lens and to recover underexplored modern women.” Though this recovery process is necessary for the field, it cannot be the only means in which the field of modernism can be reconsidered. As Laity writes in the very first issue of *Feminist Modernist Studies*, scholars should also evaluate “the ways in which taking gender/the body/women as a point of entry might expand and/or completely alter current definitions of modernism” (1). This intention sets the groundwork for my project: I want to investigate the role of the female body within modernist studies by using the language of modern dance as a way to provide an alternate reading and interpretation of modernist literature. To be specific, I am interested in embodied performance for this project, because I think the language and movement that derived from modern dance can provide a way to “re-vision,” or “re-enter” modernist studies and literature.

As Laity discusses this “re-vision” project, she also asserts that modernist studies has recovered its more prominent female modernists, ignoring many other contributing figures. She claims that the 1980s and 1990s recovery process lead to the appreciation of Virginia Woolf, H.D., and Gertrude Stein, and these writers continue to “remain the chief repositories for scholarship in Anglo/American women’s poetry and prose” (Laity 2). With this perspective in mind, this project will include the work of modernists, who while often included in modernist conversations have still not received as much attention as other high-modernists. Literature written by women and African-American authors

display their own respective uniqueness to the modernist archive, and I intend to include works from Zelda Fitzgerald, Nella Larsen, Jean Toomer, and Zora Neal Hurston.

Though these authors do not all directly write about dance in their texts, their writing offers a way in which embodiment and movement can be read into the narrative. I hope to use the kinesthetic language of Martha Graham's modern dance technique as a way to read these authors' works, identifying ways in which movement—whether constrained or uninhibited—is a response to the cultural climate of modernity.

Using dance as a lens in which literature can be read allows the words on the page to be physically inhabited and experienced, while dance, as a subset of movement, also provides a richer, more complex consideration of movement and embodiment both inside and outside of literature. By examining literature through the lens of gendered-modernism, I intend to examine how movement, as a means of embodied performance, provides a means of reconceptualizing—or extending—the field of modernism and its defining paradigms. In *Reading Dance: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*, Susan Leigh Foster writes on how to “read” dance composition. Although her interests are in viewing or watching a dance performance, she provides a way to engage with a corporeal, real-life performance that mimics the act of reading. In *Bodies of the Text: Dance as Theory, Literature as Dance*, Ellen W. Goellner and Jacqueline Shea Murphy divide their study into reading dance as text and reading dance in texts, claiming that “dance *can* focus and enrich many of the structural and theoretical discussions taking place in literary studies” (ix). Though my dissertation will not follow this exact structure, their text offers an insightful way into which dance and literature can be viewed

analogously, and I intend to use threads of their framework in my project. The notion of corporeal writing and kinesthetic language is related to the way literature is read, experienced, and embodied, and to use the language of dance and movement as a lens in which literature can be read, it allows the words on the page to be physically inhabited and experienced.

Reading is inherently an embodied act. Martha Graham's observation about the effects of the news headlines on the human body's muscles can also be applied to reading, in my opinion. Not only does the position of reading require a physical action of sitting or lying down, holding a book in your hands; there is also the empathetic reaction to reading that indubitably prompts the body to respond. Yet, beyond the physicality of reading, the language on the page is a movement, a performance as the words coalesce and function together to create meaning and purpose. Applying the language of modern dance to modernism offers a new way to understand how the body politic operates as a locus of experience and interaction. Although Martha Graham did not originate the modern dance style, she is often named as the Mother of Modern Dance because of the language she gave to the moves and steps specific to the dance style. In reference to Graham's modern dance style, in *Beginning Modern Dance*, Miriam Giguere writes,

According to Martha Graham's philosophy, movement is generated from three places: the action of contraction and release, the pelvis, and the emotional inner self. The contraction, or strong pulling back and curving of the torso, and the release of this movement by returning to a straight torso are symbolic of the

dichotomies in life. It is the contrast between desire and duty, between fear and courage, between weakness and strength. The repeated use of the contraction and release gives a rhythmic energy to the movements in this technique, and its execution is central to the seated, lying, and standing exercises of the training method. The torso and pelvis, in this way, are the central focus of the movement, while the arms and legs move in concert with the spine.

As this passage indicates and as the picture of Graham's *Clytemnestra* performance suggests (Figure 1.1), her language of contraction and release is a visceral, jagged, and abstract physical movement. Raising her left leg in an *attitude devant* and bending her right standing leg for stability, Graham channels energy and strength from her spine into her limbs. Relying on the use of the solar plexus, a group of nerves in the sympathetic nervous system that are action-oriented, Graham recognized that the emotional inner self and its energy functioned in response to the external world: the news headlines, the trauma of modernity.

While most dance practices utilize the spine and the core as the center, or grounding device, for the body to balance throughout rhythmic movement, Graham adapts Isadora Duncan's use of the solar plexus. According to Isadora Duncan, the solar plexus is the "temporal home of the soul," which she used to defy ballet's distortion of a woman's body, preferring natural and free movements that were reflective of the solar plexus (Duncan 306). As both Graham and Duncan convey, the solar plexus, which is located in the lower abdomen and often associated with chakra systems, is symbolic of power, action, and energy, but being a part of the action-oriented sympathetic system, it



Figure 1: Martha Graham, Clytemnestra

also allows for a release of fear and anxiety. Graham extends Duncan's interpretation of the solar plexus by allowing the energy of the sympathetic system to respond to the traumas of modernity and culture.

Graham's use of contraction and release in conjunction with the solar plexus and sympathetic nervous system accentuates the physicality of dance—an art entirely reliant on the movement of the human body and the manifestation of energy. As her commentary on the physical response to the news headlines suggests, contraction and release is not simply a modern dance gesture; instead, it is a response, a means of interpreting and interacting with an affective environment and feeling. In *Dance and Politics*, Dana Mills writes:

Martha Graham gave the world an evolving language with which to think about the world in and through moving bodies. That language was never static and never stable; in line with her interpretation of life and dance (which are always intertwined), this language was entangled in contradictions and tensions...Throughout her life Graham created a shared space in which bodies conversed. Those bodies created methods of inscription that responded to her innovative methods of inscription. (49).

Graham's philosophy of modern dance and the corresponding language she creates offers a way in which gendered movement can be envisioned as a somatic response to modernity, a way in which women learn how to navigate in a modern world.

Though Martha Graham provides a form of movement that celebrates the unrestricted woman body, her philosophy is also indicative of the restraints imposed on

the female body, prompting consideration of how women's movement is both limited and constrained. Her dance style is undoubtedly a response to modernity, illustrating a manner in which women found freedom through a particular style of movement. As Graham suggests, the muscles of the human body are acting in *response*—and that response can embody both freedom and/or restriction. While Graham, alongside many other modern women dancers, were known for their embodied freedom, Graham's terminology and philosophy accentuate that modern dance—as a subset of movement—is also a way for the human body to communicate. Dance is a kinetic archive and a form of oral tradition, embodying the past and present, somatically illustrating cultural tension and speaking as a reflection of social experience. Though modern dance provided a means of unrestrained movement for many women, the dance style is also demonstrative of how women's movement is simply a response, an active force acknowledging the reverberations of women's suffrage, urbanization, technological advancement, and the travesty of war.

The connections between modern dance and modernism may, at times, be blurry and inchoate, yet modern dance provides a manner in which to consider how expressive movement in modernism and how gender restriction prompts a physical response. Dance is inherently stylistic movement, and it is vital to explore how movement offers women a way to engage or respond to modernity. By investigating the role of movement in modernist literature, this approach provides a way to explore how it offers a means of self-exploration and self-actualization. Based on this approach, I structure my project to discuss how movement is reflected in the text and then move to how various dance styles



emerged. While my first chapter contextualizes *19 Poses* and the genealogy of modern dance, the next chapter focuses on the role of movement in an important modernist play, examining whether it constrains or liberates women. In the third and fourth chapter, I will transition from movement to dance, exploring other dance styles outside of modern dance and addressing their presence in modernity. *19 Poses* is the heart of this project, running as a thread that connects the intricacies of women's autonomy, movement, and experience; this performance also conveys how the limited connection between modern dance and modernism allows the dance style, as a form of embodied performance, to be viewed as a form of expressive movement that coalesces and generates other dance styles that are reflective of modernism and its other various artforms.

It is within this framework that I structure my project. Chapter One historicizes modern dance. By doing this, I further address how the dance style is a female-led movement and how it intersects/connects with race, gender, and sexuality, and why the gendered nature of this movement is intricate to consider when applied to modernist studies. This female-led movement, I argue, provides a kinesthetic language that revitalizes how modernist literature is read (which will be thoroughly fleshed out in subsequent chapters) With this specific chapter, I turn my attention to the style created by modern dancers and the terminology, predominantly created by Martha Graham. The fundamental poses used in modern dance are key to understanding what makes modern dance *modern*, but even more, these specific dance movements convey how the human body contorts and shifts to create a dance style. Like the key attributes of modernist literature, modern dance is also quantified by important stylistic measures that signal it as

such.

In this chapter, I focus on how dance furthered/intersected/amplified women's suffrage and activism for the 19th Amendment; additionally, I make connections to the field of modernist studies and its current limitations. I predominantly focus on Martha Graham Dance Company's *19 Poses*, "reading" her choreography in a way that privileges the female body. However, I situate Martha Graham's repertoire and legacy as important yet inflated in terms of the modern dance genealogy. This is not to diminish the significance of Martha Graham, but it also allows for a conversation about the other worthy figures who contributed to the modern dance style. Positioning Martha Graham within the modern dance genealogy and paying tribute to her work provides room in which I can investigate and navigate how modern dance was merely one form of movement emerging during the early twentieth century. By acknowledging Graham's work, and then paying homage to the other dance figures who were significant during this time, I can cultivate a conversation about women and movement that intersects with issues of identity and embodiment.

To further establish why modern dance and embodied performance provides a way to interact and re-vision modernist literature, and to illuminate how women's movement during the modernist period is often restricted and constrained, Chapter Two uses Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* to convey the kinetic backdrop in which modern dance responds to. Within this text, women's bodies are prevalent—even despite being dismissed or objectified. Treadwell's play depicts how women's bodies have been overworked and mechanized, yet Young Woman's character attempts to reject

mechanization despite the constant (re)production and industrialization surrounding her. To further my discussion about the body politics of the suffragettes, Chapter Two explores how women's movements are often constrained, yet at times, they can also be simultaneously insurrectionary and *silent*. I define silence as places where speech is withheld or meaning is intentionally obscured, and it is through these spaces of silence where new forms of communication can emerge. *Machinal's* rhythmic language—the syncopation of the language—is indicative of how the play's protagonist navigates constrained and liberated movement. I also consider how the presence of silence allows the protagonist to formulate a dance of self-expression which allows her to develop her own rhythm and movement.

In Chapter Three, I transition to the figure of the flapper and its connections to Zelda Fitzgerald, ballet, and expressive movement. Zelda Fitzgerald, named the “original flapper,” is symbolic of the Jazz Age and women's newly acquired freedom. Zelda's representation of this historical moment for women points to a charismatic, flamboyant, and riotous female figure who parades a bobbed haircut and short, swinging skirt. As in Chapter Two, I consider the tension between constrained and liberated movement. I argue that Zelda manipulated the figure of the flapper to exemplify her definition of feminine autonomy; I also consider Zelda's only novel *Save Me the Waltz*. Her novel chronicles her life with F. Scott through a thinly veiled semi-autobiographical work in which her protagonist Alabama Beggs strives to become a ballet dancer. Alabama, like Zelda, takes up ballet in her late twenties and is consumed by the artform. Thus, Chapter Three

consider Zelda's novel as a revisionist work of modernist literature that accentuates embodied performance and the synergy between dance and language.

Chapter Four continues to read dance in texts and explores the intersection between racial identity and expressive movement. I frame my discussion of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* with Josephine Baker's dance history and performance style. My reading of Baker's physical, performative texts and Larsen's literary text explore the intricacies of inhabiting a body of color. Chapter Four explores how dancing black individuals use dance to embody, speak, and express the inexpressible through embodied performance.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **19 Poses/19th Amendment: The “Dreadful” Women Who Performed Freedom**

The premiere of the Martha Graham Dance Company’s (MGDC) 2019 season began with *19 Poses*, which was first performed in August of that year. As the title suggests, the performance is a conglomeration of nineteen poses that are reflective of a variety of Martha Graham’s choreographed dance performances. MGDC also collected poses from specific moments in a variety of Graham’s choreographed numbers, creating an interactive digital project. *19 Poses* was intended to be a celebration of the forthcoming centennial of the 19th Amendment on August 18, 2020. In its heralding of the women’s suffrage movement and women’s right to vote, this performance piece is a reminder of how modern dance was a women-led and women-dominated artform. MGDC began their 2019/2020 season with *19 Poses*, but their entire performance series was entitled “The Eve Project.” Janet Eilber, the Artistic Director of MGDC writes, “The Eve Project is intended to connect audiences—in the ephemeral and visceral way dance does—to both historical and contemporary ideas of the feminine” (MGDC). It is not only a celebration of the 19th Amendment, but “an underlying statement about female power” (MGDC). *19 Poses*, as merely one performance within “The Eve Project” encapsulates the vision and mission of Martha Graham’s dance and choreography, while also playing homage to the Suffragettes, and women more broadly.

At a glance, *19 Poses* seems to focus exclusively on Martha Graham’s contributions to modern dance and her legacy as a woman innovator and performer. While this performance piece is inherently a commemoration of Martha Graham, her

contributions to dance, and her repertoire of choreography, however, it is also a celebration of the 19th Amendment and suffrage. Graham's presence in *19 Poses* exemplified the intersection of the body politic and embodied performance, cultivating a kinesthetic language that reified women's rights and freedom. The performance piece is at once about Graham, modern dance, and women's suffrage, illustrating women navigating power differentials, feminine technique and style, and subversive freedom. It is fitting to use *19 Poses* as a celebratory performance piece that recognizes not only Graham's fight for women on stage, but also a group of women who used a different form of insurrection to warrant attention and prompt negotiation for their rights. The suffragettes, like Graham and other modern dancers, used a form of movement as their platform: marching in the streets, demanding the vote, longing for equality and a voice to decide their future, as well as their nation's.

*19 Poses* uses Martha Graham's choreography to convey an array of femininities and types of womanhood. Though the performance piece centralizes on Graham because it is her company and legacy, *19 Poses* provides a manner in which to perceive women's suffrage as an embodied performance. The suffragettes were not silent in their activism, and their protests were physical and embodied, their bodies experiencing violence and brutality as they peacefully protested. On March 3, 1913, thousands of marchers took to the streets of Washington D.C., women of all backgrounds and walks of life gathered together on Pennsylvania Avenue to protest inequality. The "pioneers," women who had been fighting for the women's vote for decades, led the march, and they were followed by women of various occupations who were dressed in their uniforms and work-apparel.

Many women were attacked and ridiculed by men and police, but still they persisted. Upon reaching the Treasury Building, the suffragettes performed tableaux and dances, portraying the historical injustices of women. Similar to Graham's performance of fierce women such as Clytemnestra, Jostra, Phaedra, and Medea, the suffragettes embodied a performance of self. Wearing their work garb and marching for their own equality, each woman representing her own identity; the suffragettes' activism surpassed merely being a political agenda, but it demonstrated a remarkable celebration of women's individual and collective identities.

I aim to use the Martha Graham Dance Company's *19 Poses* as a connection point between Graham's repertoire and choreography, the history of modern dance, and women's suffrage and activism. *19 Poses* is indubitably a tribute to Graham, but it is first and foremost, a celebration of the 19th Amendment, of women's right to vote. Yet that prompts a conversation about who was still excluded from the ratification of the 19th Amendment, and how dance became a way to navigate, experience, and embody freedom. Marginalization still permeated much of culture, and this was evident in the push and pull between who was given access to dance and performance. Conversations about exclusion and marginalization are also evident in terms of women's suffrage; likewise, the history of modern dance also necessitates and prompts conversations about race, gender, and sexuality. While I intend to pay special tribute to Martha Graham and *19 Poses*, exploring Graham's performance piece as a celebration of modern dance and women's freedom, it is necessary to recognize the margins of any political or social

movement. I will more thoroughly address conversations about the margins and exclusions of modern dance—and suffrage—in Chapter Four.

*19 Poses* serves as the backdrop for Chapter One, illuminating the relations between Graham, modern dance, and suffrage. I intend to trace the lineage of modern dance, using the history of this performance style to accentuate the nexus of women's suffrage and women in modern dance: an embodied performance of self and identity. By looking past Martha Graham, and exploring modern dance in its entirety, I can examine how this particular dance style is not merely a collaborative effort of innovative movement, but rather a distinctly personal and political play with expression, identity, and cultural insurrection. The coalition of dancers who participated in the inception and cultivation of modern dance were adamant in their break with traditional ballet and visual spectacle; they wanted to create a dance style with substance. Modern dancers rebelled against ballet and the “belief that the dancer’s body must be tortured into ethereality” (Copeland). Even more, “Early modern dance is first and foremost a repudiation of late 19th century ballet. And it is essential to recognize that this repudiation is boldly feminist in character” (Copeland). The ripples of this change are evidenced throughout the generations of modern dancers, and many of the women who pioneered modern dance heralded this activism as political performance, not simply a visual spectacle. As the personal became political, modern dancers of various genders, races, and backgrounds learned how to use movement as a form of self-expression and cultural commentary.

To many, Martha Graham is synonymous with modern dance, and though there are at least thirty prominent figures who have some connection to the lineage of modern



dance, Graham often encapsulates the vision and mission specific to the dance style. She deserves credit for the cultivation and implementation of her terminology and technique, her rich and subversive repertoire, and the invention of a dance company still thriving in the 21st century. Yet an exclusive emphasis on Graham has the capacity to oversimplify the complex genealogy of the movement with which she is associated. Graham is one important piece in an entire collective of dancers who all sought to disrupt traditional ballet choreography and its confining limitations.

I do not intend to diminish Martha Graham's choreography or technique, because I, myself, as a dancer for over twenty years who has significant training in both ballet and modern dance, know it is impossible to ignore Graham's contributions to the artform. But, it can be even more harmful to position Graham as the sole innovator of the modern dance movement; rather, she is, like many artists, a repository of learned technique and styles that she carried forth into her own choreography and company. As with writing, the incorporation and use of another dancer's style is a way to pay homage to their technique. Graham is a pivotal force in pioneering modern dance as it is known and performed in contemporary culture, yet she embodies other dance performers and dance styles; indeed, she is a moving archive of the first-generation of modern dancers, as well as the third-generation, giving technique and training to many of her successors.

Dance is an original form of oral communication, a primordial tool of corporeal language; movement and physical expression have the capacity to become archives of history and communication. Centering Martha Graham as the creator of American Modern Dance is an accurate conceptualization of her legacy, and this notion is not

intended to neglect her modern dance contemporaries. Bequeathing Graham with this title is reflective of history, even if it does have the tendency to diminish other modern dancers and their creations. To understand how Graham represents American Modern Dance—and how she created a distinctly feminine dance style—it is necessary to frame her work within the entirety of the modern dance lineage. Graham, a pioneer whose work is still taught today, is merely one moving piece within the history of modern dance. Her work, amidst her contemporaries, demonstrates how the personal can intersect with the political and public.

Of course, in discussing how the legacy of Martha Graham intersects with women's suffrage and modern dance, it is pertinent to address the plurality of history. One should acknowledge the inherent limitations and exclusions of the 19th Amendment. White women's suffrage is very different from black women's suffrage, and despite the ratification of the 19th Amendment, many African-American women were denied the right to vote until Lyndon B. Johnson's dissolution of the South's long-biding Jim Crow Laws. This is a necessary point of tension in terms of modern dance, too. Dance, or any form of movement, is a compilation of learned and perceived styles and motions, and some modern dancers adopted the rhythm and style of Afro-spiritual movement and dance. While this can be argued as a form of allyship, appropriation, or a tribute to African-American dance and rhythm, the incorporation and inclusion of Afro-spiritual movement is noteworthy in terms of modern dance as a whole. Because of the complexities and elisions evident in the presence of black dancers in the modern dance movement, Chapter Four will focus explicitly on the contributions, exclusions, and

accomplishments of Josephine Baker, while also navigating the presence of dancing black bodies in works of literature from the time period.

Any discussion of modern dance must recognize the cracks and margins. If *19 Poses* is a celebration of women's suffrage, it is important to note that this did not include all women; all women were not included in the 19th Amendment, and similarly, there are people of color involved in modern dance who were dismissed or overlooked—or, not fully included in the history of this movement, which is evident in how modern dance's history is often emphasized as a white Eurocentric movement. I do not intend to solely focus on these areas in Chapter One. These are points worth considering when forging an understanding of any history—where are the silences and omissions and how do people of color automatically get placed into those elisions? Yet what this chapter seeks to do is to examine modern dance comprehensively, to understand the elisions of the movement overall, so as to understand how Martha Graham becomes the figure that oftentimes represents this movement so thoroughly. My intention in recognizing the limitations of women's suffrage and modern dance is to offer an acknowledgement first and foremost of the various exclusions and elisions, but that also allows me room to explore the genealogy of modern dance in all of its various styles, renditions, and diversities. With that, this genealogy establishes Graham's lineage, her advocacy for women on stage. In turn, this genealogy becomes a way to examine and acknowledge how modern dance is indicative of a deeply personal political movement that celebrates women's suffrage and equality through embodied performance.

In *Ballet and Modern Dance*, Susan Au describes how ballet and other concert dance styles were defined primarily by “technical virtuosity and visual spectacle” (87). The prioritization of technique and rigid movement dismissed identity and self-expression, and “dance became little more than an extension of the decorative scheme: entertaining, enjoyable and undemanding” (Au 87). Even more, because ballet was marked by its technicality, women were forced to discipline their bodies in unnatural ways. Tight-fitting bodices were intended to accentuate the musculature of the dancer’s body, but in turn, the corsets restricted the movement and breath of the body. Additionally, women were trained to wear pointe shoes, a ballet slipper with a wooden platform that allows the dancer to rise onto the tip of her toe, creating the illusion of on-stage floating movement and motion. The costumery coupled with the academic qualifications of ballet—the external rotation of the hips in a balletic ‘turn-out’ and robotic-like *port de bras* arm movements—were some of the primary catalysts for the emergence of the modern dance movement.

In America, ballet had its humble beginnings in the late 19th and early 20th century. Popularized in Europe, traveling ballet dancers were well-received in the United States, and dancers such as Anna Pavlova and Mikhail Mordkin later moved to America to spearhead the ballet scene. According to George Amberg in *Ballet in America: The Emergence of an American Art*, “The brilliant Pavlova-Mordkin season at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1910 marks the beginning of the ballet era in America...They represented the conservative Imperial Russian ballet tradition” (Amberg). Emphasizing the technical, or restrictive qualities, of ballet, Amberg states, “[Pavlova’s]

offstage existence, the iron discipline and ceaseless work of her whole private life, was but one long, extended preparation for the exquisite, ephemeral moments of the performance” (Amberg). As Amberg states, ballet was less about the cultivation of identity and self-expression and more about discipline and technique. For women, this artistic regulation of movement was not dissimilar from how cultural standards dictated their apparel, behavior, and identity. Roger Copeland writes, “Classical ballet illustrates the way in which male choreographers...began to idealize the image of the *disembodied* woman.” It was ballet’s rigidity and regulation that prompted the first-generation of modern dancers to prefer natural movement, to create a dance style that allowed for self-expression.

Because of the limitations and deficiencies offered by the dance styles in the 19th century, “Americans, Loie Fuller (1862-1928), Isadora Duncan (1877-1927) and Ruth St. Denis (1879-1968) [sought] new forms of dancing” (Au 87). These women had their own respective experience with dance, some more than others, but they each felt a deep dissatisfaction with the forms of dancing available to them. In *The Vision of Modern Dance: In the Words of its Creators*, the editors claim, “The rebelliousness that has characterized the leaders of modern dance has its origins in the work of St. Denis, Duncan, and Fuller” (Brown et al 4). According to Au, and as evidenced in the modern dance movement, each of these women “considered herself an artist rather than a mere entertainer, and each in turn attracted the notice of other artists: writers, musicians, painters, and sculptors” (87). Or as Roger Copeland suggests, “...the issue of women’s rights is often subsumed into a concern with women’s *rites*.” Modern dance catalyzed a

distinctly feminine form of movement, and though Fuller, Duncan, and St. Denis were all dancing around the same time period, they each had their own response and interpretation of what a new, expressive form of dance would look like.

Fuller, having little prior dance training, focused very little on the theatrical quality of her dance movement telling a story; instead, she experimented with lights and colors, wearing voluminous skirts and material, keeping the fabric in motion so that she could emanate various colors with the use of lighting. She was disinterested in learning dance technique or movement and focused primarily on “the drama of her dancing emanat[ing] from its visual effects” (Au 88). While she did later invest more in her dancing skills, she always prioritized learning the technological aspects of her performance, devoting her attention to electrical lighting (as it was in its humble beginnings), colored gels, projections, and other stage technology.

Unlike Fuller, Duncan had little investment in stage dancing. She gathered inspiration from nature, believing that dance originated “from the solar plexus, the temporal home of the soul” (Duncan 306). According to Julia L. Foulkes, “Isadora Duncan drew on Hellenic ideals of government, art, architecture, and philosophy to liberate the body in reverence to the freedom of the individual spirit. Freeing her body from the corset, she reinvented walking, skipping, and leaping and elevated dance from a popular entertainment to the hallowed halls of art and nature, sometimes performing barefoot in flowing white tunics on forested laws to classical music” (9). Duncan, as Susan Au describes, “was arguably more than a dancer: she was the symbol of female longings, well-hidden or perhaps even unconscious, for emancipation from the traditional

roles of wife and mother, for sexual freedom and personal fulfilment” (89). Duncan’s dancing became a way for her to connect with others by embodying nature and reflecting and celebrating universal human emotions and attributes. Though her dance style was more informed by Greek culture and nature, the death of her children prompted her to expose a darker, more reticent, dance style later on in her career. While Duncan indubitably made a stark impact in modern dance, she made a smaller lasting impression than her contemporary Ruth St. Denis.

St. Denis’s contributions to modern dance have been more recognizable, simply because of her innovation and connections. She had extensive dance training, but she also dabbled in areas of feminism, dress reform, Christian science, Hinduism, karma and reincarnation, and Francois Delsarte’s systems of movements (Au 92). She was well-versed in a variety of popular movements and theatrical exercises, allowing her access to a number of cultural dance styles. In addition to studying ballet and acrobatics, she learned Spanish dancing, oriental culture—specifically Indian and Hindu—and later Egyptian dance. Ruth St. Denis, alongside her contemporaries, was often invited to perform inside the homes of white society women, and this financial support allowed for security, but it also permitted these women to pursue their artistic dreams more directly. For instance, this financial support helped “women who were struggling to form careers as artists and loosen dance from its vaudeville and burlesque ties...this patronage by elite members of society gave dance a new cultural legitimacy” (Foulkes 10). But most importantly, the financial support Fuller, Duncan, and St. Denis received from elite society donors permitted them “the association of dance as an artistic medium...” (10),

providing them with opportunities to break out as artists, which was also intricately connected to their views on the freedom of women's bodies.

St. Denis went on to have a more successful career, unlike Fuller and Duncan, starting a dance company alongside her husband and business partner, Ted Shawn. Their company, Denishawn, was the starting point for dancers such as Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham, which emphasizes the importance of the modern dance lineage. However, as modern dance took shape, giving life to new, upcoming dancers, the movement not only paralleled women's suffrage and fight for freedom, but a variety of other emerging dance styles. As Foulkes writes, "'Dance madness' consumed working- and middle-class men and women in the 1910s and 1920s, and dance halls became a public arena in which men and women mingled and bartered for sexual favors. Dance halls and cabarets allowed for exploration of body movement, from the stylized one-step of Vernon and Irene Castle to the turkey trot, with its flapping arms and legs that resembled those of its namesake" (11). As men and women began to experiment more with movement through dance styles, it exposed the issues of modernity—prescribed gender roles, immigration, industrialization, overpopulated cities, and women's suffrage (Foulkes 13). Social dancing, in conjunction with modern dance, was a way for people of different races and classes to create and cultivate forms of movement that were appropriate and specific to their current perception of culture.

Social dancing was often a form of rebellion against the dance classes taught in settlement homes despite the fact that the dance styles taught in settlement homes often encouraged self-expression. Settlement homes, founded by activist Jane Addams, offered



educational and cultural community programs that intended to alleviate the financial and cultural burden of European immigrants. Middle-class individuals had the opportunity to volunteer to live in these homes, offering educational, cultural, and healthcare to lower-class immigrants in. According to dance historian Linda Tomko, middle-class white women taught proper ways to move through dance, hoping to turn “immigrant women into proper Americans” (qtd. in Foulkes 13). Because dance did not require spoken language, the physical expression of movement allowed women who were struggling to learn English a means to communicate with others, which led many women to pursue social dancing as an outlet, though that was not the case for Helen Tamiris. The daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants, Tamiris grew up in poverty and less than ideal living conditions. Born Helen Becker, she began taking dance classes at the Henry Street Settlement House at a young age, learning folk dance and ballet.

Despite the settlement homes’ teaching of self-expression and flowing movement, Tamiris preferred ballet and its rigid structure. After getting a job with the Metropolitan Opera and traveling on tour to South America, Tamiris was challenged to explore other forms of art, having realized the “artificiality of ballet” (Foulkes 15). Tamiris turned to modern dance, relishing the freedom and bare feet provided by the dance style. “The bare feet of modern dance attracted poor dancers who could not afford pointe shoes, recalled Faith Rehyer Jackson. Poverty influenced political ideology among early modern dancers...these women turned to body movement to express their social and political ideals” (Foulkes 15). Upon shifting her attention to modern dance, Tamiris began working on sharing dance with a wider dance, prioritizing social commitments and

injustice. She is best known for her work *Negro Spirituals*, a collection of dances that display “the different aspects of the black experience in American...from the weariness and desolation...” (Au 129). As a white person, *Negro Spirituals* become a space of tension, because while Tamiris worked to deconstruct racial injustice, she also appropriated Afro-spirituality and black culture. However, Tamiris seemingly provided a space for black performers, inviting Katherine Dunham to participate in *Negro Spirituals*. Dunham was able to inhabit and exemplify the dancing black body, yet there are complexities in how she participated in a performance of American black culture created through the white lens of Tamiris’ choreographed narrative.

Katherine Dunham, like many other contemporary black artists, fought against the standards of modernist aesthetics and its inherent whiteness. An anthropologist, scholar, and dancer, Dunham did not choreograph performances that were meant to deconstruct whiteness or white supremacy; rather, she intended to accentuate and celebrate black culture and African-American history. Her vision of modern dance embodied a break with oppressive dance styles like ballet, yet she also cultivated a form of expressive movement that gave life and vitality to the black American community. This act, like those of other modern dance pioneers, accentuates the individualistic, expressive quality of modern dance. It is inherently a form of rhythmic personality and bodily poetic, and a collective of women (primarily) prompted change with their bodies’ movements, singular in their personal dance endeavors, yet united as they each sought to create a dance style that rebelled against the strictures of ballet, women’s oppression, and the lingering ramifications of Victorian mentality. Moreover, the highly expressionistic nature of

modern dance underscores how inextricable race, class, and gender are from this particular style.

While modern dance is certainly a form of activism, some of the founders and contributors of this movement did not consider dance as a way to embody identity or tell a story through choreography. For instance, Doris Humphrey, one of Graham's contemporaries, has been widely acknowledged for creating dance-oriented breathing techniques, yet she was ambivalent towards storytelling or self-expression in dance. Humphrey, alongside Charles Weidman, formed Humphrey-Weidman Dance Company, which was active for nearly two decades. José Limón, one of Humphrey-Weidman's most prominent students, is known to be the creator of the Limón Technique, but the breathing technique was actually created and implemented by Humphrey; Limón merely adopted and refined it for further use in his company. Limón Technique, the concept also known as "fall and recovery," is a technique that uses the pattern of breath to inform movement.

Humphrey is one of few to have established any form of technique or terminology in relation to modern dance. According to Rachel Rizzuto, *The Humphrey Fall and Recovery Theory* "technique utilized the rhythm of an inhale and exhale to emphasize the momentum of a movement—swing, suspensions, leaps, turns—giving the simplest of steps definitive moments of off-balance and eventual stability." To be specific, Humphrey's technique—which was later refined by Limón—focused on how the breath is connected to movement, essentially considering how one movement is linked to the next. A bouncing ball, or a swing, is often used as an example of how the breath leads

from one movement to the next, illustrating how the shifting of body weight and breathwork is connected to the movement of a choreographed routine. Limón, unlike Humphrey, did believe in self-expression, recognizing that the spine's flexibility, the isolations of various body parts, and breathing patterns affect movement. What is most noteworthy about Humphrey is her development of a dance technique and practice, despite her disregard towards the self-expressive, identity-based politics of modern dancers. Humphrey focused primarily on the body's movements, conceiving of techniques that centralized on how the body functions in dance and dismissing the identity-based politics that other modern dancers viewed as inextricable from body and movement.

The dancers I have discussed thus far are merely a sampling of the modern dance genealogy, and they offer a unique spectrum of modern dancers' respective interpretation and understanding of movement. The individuality of many modern dancers reaffirms the identity-based politics that was embedded within women's suffrage—even despite its limitations. Each dancer illustrates an interpretation of what she perceives modern dance to be about, and for some, modern dance was primarily a physical action, while for others it was an interwoven play of identity and movement. As the suffragettes' march on Washington D.C. displays, women's political activism was inherently about identity. These women marching for the right to vote, portrayed an embodied performance of self, similar to modern dancers. However, the work of Martha Graham accentuates this discussion of embodied performance and identity, displaying how performative movement and self-expression are inextricable, inherently linked. In “Martha Graham's

House of the Pelvic Truth: The Figuration of Sexual Identities and Female Empowerment,” Graham scholar Henrietta Bannerman writes, “In the late 1920s and early 1930s Graham redefined the boundaries of what could be thought of as feminine in dance” (33). Bannerman continues to write that the broader themes incorporated and instilled in Graham’s choreography are “truths that spring from female experience” (33). The work of Martha Graham redefined American modern dance, establishing and inspiring new forms of femininity and womanhood, especially in terms of performance.

Martha Graham, who emerged from the Denishawn collective (Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn’s company) rallied against the confines of ballet like many of her predecessors. I have only discussed the contributions of a few dancers, and this sampling merely gives a brief overview of these dancers’ backgrounds and views on creating a new dance style. Many of the dancers prior to Graham experimented and played with expressionism, contributing to the modern dance style without establishing or pioneering it as a movement. This part of modern dance, the highly personalized and deeply soulful part, makes it difficult to trace as a movement. Because Graham adopted the practices and beliefs of her predecessors, using their foundation to cultivate a distinct style and terminology, she does get extensive credit as being the mother of modern dance. It is not a title that is undeserved, but it can negate the contributions of her contemporaries; however, Graham receives notoriety and is heralded as a pioneer of modern dance because she entirely reshaped American dance. Graham not only established technique and terminology; she illustrated the essence of embodied performativity, exemplifying the intersection of identity politics with activism. Graham wanted to convey a multitude

of femininities and depictions of womanhood, and with that, she used that activism as a foundation for her choreographic endeavors. While Graham was not the only innovator of modern dance can pose limitations, it is evident that her work truly laid the foundation for how the lineage of modern dance continued in America—and how it established a form of corporeal polemics that has continued to be celebrated, which is evidenced in MGDC's *19 Poses*.

Born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania on May 11, 1894, Graham was inspired by her father, Dr. George Greenfield Graham, and his work in nervous disorders. Dr. Graham believed the body could express inner sensations, and based on her father's instruction, Martha Graham came to believe that "Movement never lies" (Graham 20). As Dr. Graham explained to his daughter, "Each of us tells our own story without speaking" (Graham 20). Though Graham did not have significant dance training until she was in her twenties, this early foundation in and exposure to medicine, bodily communication, and neurology bolstered Graham's awareness and attunement with how the body produces authentic, unfettered movement.

In 1908, the Graham's moved to Santa Barbara, California, and in 1911, Graham saw a poster of Ruth St. Denis while walking along a street of shops in town. She begged her father to take her to Los Angeles to see St. Denis perform, and at the age of 17, Graham claimed, "I knew at that moment I was going to be a dancer" (56). Continuing her education in English literature and drama, Graham did not fully pursue her dance dreams until the age of 22 when she arrived at the Denishawn school for a summer course. St. Denis asked Graham to dance/audition for her, and Graham, having no prior

dance training background, “reacted beat by beat to the music...mov[ing] furiously” (Graham 61). Unimpressed, St. Denis sent Graham to train with Ted Shawn. Though Graham’s beginnings were humble, she worked hard, using the knowledge from her father and her own perseverance to thrive at Denishawn. Training with first-generation dancers, she familiarized herself with the mission of these dancers, using their beliefs and ideologies about modern dance as a foundation for the technique and terminology she later invented. At Denishawn, Graham was exposed to a form of ballet without shoes, as well as a variety of ethnic and folk dance styles.

In her autobiography *Blood Memory*, Graham writes about her dance journey, expounding on her childhood years, her time at Denishawn, and the steps she took to branch out on her own, which eventually led her to founding the Martha Graham Dance Company. Graham’s writing, like her dancing, is filled with reverence towards the human body, her language rich as she claims, “I think the reason dance has held such an ageless magic for the world is that it has been the symbol of the performance of the living...It is an expression that touches me deeply, for the instrument which the dance speaks is also the instrument through which life is lived—the human body” (Graham 4). In an essay written in 1937, Graham also writes, “Throughout time dance has not changed in one essential function. The function of the dance is communication. The responsibility that dance fulfill its function belongs to us who are dancing today” (qtd. in Brown et al 50). Being inspired by her father’s words about the transparency of movement, dance is a way for the body to communicate the identity and self authentically, with intention and purpose.

The language Graham uses to describe dance is reflected and embedded in the writing of many of her peers and contemporaries. *The Vision of Modern Dance*, a collection of essays from modern dancers from both America and Europe, displays each dancer's deep recognition and adoration of the human body, breathwork, and the body's ability to create and speak a corporeal language. Though there are varying ideologies and philosophies specific to each dancer, the underlying mission is distinctly similar: movement never lies, and the body is speaking while in motion, through gestures. As mentioned previously, the origins of modern dance can be traced to St. Denis, Duncan, and Fuller, yet the official beginning of American modern dance does not come until the second-generation, specifically with Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey. The editors of *The Vision of Modern Dance* state,

*This was the beginning of American modern dance. For the first time American dancers were creating new movements for new subject matter, and reflecting their own era rather than a previous one. Their movements evolved from the meaning of the dance, rather than from previously learned steps developed by peoples of a different culture. In this process of finding new techniques to express their art, these modern dance pioneers broke the existing rules; indeed, that was their intent, for they were anti-Denishawn, anti-ballet, anti-the past. The percussive, angular, and often distorted movements of early modern dance expressed the tensions of contemporary life...At the same time, dance ceased to be regarded primarily as entertainment, and through new aesthetics, it achieved the status of a serious, creative, independent art form. (Brown et al 44)*



Both Graham and Humphrey incorporated movements and gestures that are traceable to Denishawn, which accentuates the overlap and inherent co-opting of artforms, as well as how the style of modern dance as a polemical and artistic movement is a collective of shared choreography, knowledge, and aesthetics. Graham, unlike Humphrey, viewed dance as a way to communicate a personal interpretation of contemporary life through stylized movement; for Humphrey, it was merely a physical performance that coincided with the culture of the day.

The Martha Graham technique has become a staple in the history and continuation of modern dance. Martha Graham's Dance Company is still a vital, active company in the 21st century, and MGDC still performs her choreographed routines from the 1930s and 1940s. Martha Graham, her name, her work, and her pedagogy and style—these facets are intricate and definitive when it comes to her being synonymous with modern dance. She ardently believed her body to be a tool that could tell stories and prompt change, which is evident in how she implemented the Graham Technique. This technique is still a cornerstone of American dance, and it involves several specific positions/postures: contraction and release, spiraling, falls, core work. The first two positions are specific terms given to her pedagogical practices, yet the last two are not necessarily terms she used, but a general abstract way to define the movements she thought were critical to modern dance. These techniques mirrored her definition of self and her understanding of culture; the abstract, jagged modern dance poses were about telling a story of the present, how she was experiencing the world as a woman who felt isolated and excluded.

One of the most vital forms of motion, or one of the most dominant postures, created by Graham is movement initiated from the core. While most dance practices utilize the spine and the core as the center, or grounding device, for the body to balance throughout rhythmic movement, Graham adapts Isadora Duncan's use of the solar plexus. As Duncan believed, the energy and movement of the body begins from the core/solar plexus, which is located in the lower abdomen and associated with chakra systems. This initiation from the core is specific to the contraction and release motion. Contraction and release is not entirely a position, but rather a *movement*. It is a motion, a transition, a gesture into something; the force of the contraction helps the body move through space, changing its trajectory between movements and gestures. In "Dancing Free: Women's Movements in Early Modern Dance," Dee A. Reynolds writes,

The actual style of movement that Graham evolved, and which is widely regarded as the first systematic modern dance technique, was based on her principle of contraction and release: the effect on the body of exhaling (contraction) and inhaling (release). Exhaling brings about a change in postural alignment, which the hips tuck under, the back rounds, the shoulders come forward, and the torso forms a concave line. Inhaling reverses this effect, pushing the hips, back, and shoulders and head back into alignment.

Like Humphrey's breathing techniques and the Fall and Recovery Technique, Graham's contraction and release method emphasizes the vitality of the breath and its connection to the human body. But while Graham's technique reflects her predecessors and contemporaries, Graham also invigorates a distinct form of movement. This style has

ensured Graham's fame as a prominent modern dance figure, but even more, this specific style accentuates a deeper notion interwoven within gender, femininity, and sexuality.

Though contraction and release is very much a movement initiated from the core, Graham, at one point in her career, signaled about a woman, "She would never have been a dancer. She doesn't move from her vagina" (qtd. in Reynolds 273). As modern dance is inherently a female-dominated artform, the recognition given to the vagina at once problematizes and heightens the femininity of modern dance. To be sure, contemporary feminism and gender studies are bound to grapple with the essentialism embedded within modern dance; however, while this is an area of tension, it is impossible to reconcile these differences based on the distinct culture modern dance emerged out of. Henrietta Bannerman accentuates this notion, explaining that Graham was working within a specific cultural milieu and its definitions of femininity. As Reynolds acknowledges, "These early modern dancers, as we have seen, reclaimed the body for women as an instrument of expression" (274). Considering the culture modern dance originated within, the women who pioneered this artistic movement "introduced new performance modes for the female body that challenged stereotypical images of the ideal performer, images that were themselves inseparable from social ideals of womanhood. The dancing body became a locus of resistance, where women took control of their bodies to project different images of femininity" (Reynolds 248). With this, modern dance became a proto-feminist movement, riding the fringes of women's suffrage and innovating different perceptions of women, their bodies and sexuality.

Modern dance provided women with a platform, allowing them the capacity to use their bodies through performative movement as a subversive tool. Unlike the Denishawn ideologies, Graham was adamant about emphasizing the Americanness of her work, saying, “I wanted in all my arrogance, to do something in dance uniquely American” (120). But with this longing to create an American phenomenon, she also established a form of women’s activism. This particular dance style, though a conglomerative effort and style established by a number of dancers and performers, rests on the laurels of Graham, because she co-opted the style in a way that privileged women and their experiences. Her company’s early years only permitted female performers, and initially, her company only performed for an audience of women. That later changed as her company evolved, but until 1938 neither Graham nor her performers were subjected to the male gaze (Reynolds 264); only women were permitted to attend her shows, allowing Graham and her dancers to perform without scrutiny or objectification.

This notion emphasizes why *19 Poses* heralds Graham and her contribution to suffrage; she wanted her audience to resonate and connect with the depictions of femininity. As Bannerman muses, “I understood that the pubic bone is the ‘seed of the body’ (G. Jackson 1982, 53), and that for Graham’s female dancers the pelvic area of the body, vital for procreation and giving birth, houses the core of her movement” (31). These centralized movements are to “sensitize the body for emotional expression—the acts of laughing, sobbing, anger, fear...to coil the internal forces into a tight spring so that the concentrated energy when released propels the body outwards into space” (Bannerman 31). To be specific, these very feminine forms of motion are regarded as

establishing Graham's repertoire and ideological performances. Graham performed versions of femininity, initially only allowing women to witness these acts because an audience of women could empathize and connect with the movement.

With her early company, Graham focused on empowering women on the stage, and Graham was often the focal point of these dances. As Reynolds states, "Many of her dances were solos, and it has been remarked that even her group dances were very close to solos, with the group acting as a foil for Graham herself, who was always cast as an individual, wearing feminine costumes" (264). Graham centralized on how to create femininity as "powerful and autonomous...the women came across as complete in themselves, so that the presence of men would have been an intrusion" (264). Though Graham might not have aligned herself with the early feminist movement directly, she recognized the value of women using their bodies as form of pure and honest storytelling, harnessing the essentialist qualities of their bodies to cultivate a form of femininity and womanhood that rebelled against the cultural norm at the time.

In consideration of this, Graham's ideologies and her polemics of movement give language to how women's suffrage can be understood. Graham's mother often said that she played "dreadful women on stage" (Graham 114), yet Graham did not see this as problematic. In her dance "Heretic," her character constantly came up against "a wall of defiance that [she] could not break" (Graham 114), because she perceived her notions and performance style as one that stood outside the cultural norm. Her dance style was a ghastly, but vital force. Like suffrage, it was complex, startling, and countercultural, but it was a necessary way to draw attention to power-differentials and gender roles. As

Reynolds claims, “...the innovative work of these women [in modern dance] not only revolutionized the art of dance, but also pushed the parameters of modernist experimentation with the medium—here, movements of the body itself—into the realm of gender politics” (274). Despite the loose connections between modern dance and suffrage, Graham’s ideologies and choreography demonstrate her fervent belief in establishing a form of stylized movement that celebrated femininity in all of its variations.

As this chapter has attempted to navigate the various generations and styles of modern dance, it has also sought to forge the connections between *19 Poses*, women’s suffrage, and Graham’s role as a modern dance pioneer. Martha Graham’s legacy has continued, and she is recognized as the primary figure of modern dance simply because she actively forged forms of polemical performance. She was trained by first generation modern dancers, and though there are several other dancers who preceded Graham, her style was distinctly American and feminine. As Roger Copeland suggested, Graham, like her contemporaries, illuminated the issue of women’s rights by invigorating and performing women’s *rites*—how women perform and embody the self, a celebration and commemoration of feminine identity. With that, *19 Poses*, the Martha Graham Dance Company’s tribute to the 19th Amendment, a call to celebrate the suffragettes, their polemics, and their successes becomes a poignant representation of how Graham navigated gender politics. *19 Poses* encapsulates the very heart of modern dance and women’s suffrage by accentuating various definitions of womanhood and femininity, portraying an embodied performance of identity.

While *19 Poses* anachronistically examines Graham's performances and their prominence through a 21st century lens/mindset, the performance piece is inherently a reflection of Graham's most provocative works of choreography. Each of the nineteen poses performed by Graham signal reverence and activism towards all forms of femininity. Modern dance as a whole has elisions and omissions, and Graham's own performance pieces are also reflective of this. While these exclusions are necessary to recognize, it is also vital to perceive Graham's ambition and activism in attempting to reflect various versions of womanhood—and hiring dancers of various races and ethnicities. Though modern dance did not directly connect with or support women's suffrage, *19 Poses* indicates this dance style was a form of activism as it provides a fresh way to consider how the suffragettes' activism was an embodied performance.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Talking Bodies: Silence/Embodiment and Kinesthetic Language in Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal***

Dance is a form of communication and self-expression, a means for visceral responses and reactions to manifest from the human body all while conveying a deeply personal sense of stylistic movement. In Chapter One, I discussed how Martha Graham believed the human body to be an instrument of communication, a vehicle that carries truth and purpose that does not know how to lie or hide the truth. As Graham's father said, "Movement never lies" (Graham 20). The body responds and reacts honestly, providing an embodied narrative that allows truth to emanate from silences and omissions. It is this sheer honesty, a capacity for transparency, that allows the human body to interact with others and the environment in a primordial, prelinguistic manner. However, that does not mean that the body is distanced or separated from language. Language moves—through the organization of the words on a page, the rhythm and staccato of orality, or the progression of a narrative—and though the body might convey a sheer honesty that language can manipulate and misrepresent, I think it is possible to read dance into language and literature. Dance, a form of communication that predates language in many ways, can be read into literature because it offers an embodied way in which to conceive of the linguistics of a text. The language becomes tangible, indicative of a lived, moving body, and that movement can be linked to dance, a way to both communicate and express one's body and thoughts. Specifically, I think the kinetic backdrop that permeates modernist literature allows dance to be read into the texts—



especially texts that involve female protagonists and characters who appear to be silenced, constrained, or limited. It is these moments of constrained existence and mobility that accentuate the necessity to explore how dance, a form of self-expression and communication, is entangled within the silences and restrictions of women in literature.

As I consider the moments where expressive movement produces a richer form of communication, my ideas are informed by Ewa Ptonowska Ziarek's *Feminist Aesthetics and the Politics of Modernism*. In this text, Ziarek writes about a "feminist aesthetics of potentiality," examining "the devastating impact of sexist and racist violence of women's lives and bodies" (3). Ziarek later writes: "I raise a new question that has not yet been addressed by feminist critics of modernity, namely the question of the political and aesthetic implications of the suffragettes' redefinition of the right to vote as the right to *revolt*" (4; emphasis added). As a continuation of Chapter One and my discussion of the suffragettes' body politics as well as the mothers of modern dance, I use Ziarek's claims here to coalesce with my own ideas: women and their right to revolt; the kinetic backdrop of modernist literature; and the women of modernity and how they navigated the complexities of sexism, racism, mechanization, and technology. Chapter Two further invigorates my claims about embodied performance as I explore the kinetic backdrop in modernist literature and denote how women create expression through movement and action. I establish how women's movement is often restricted and constrained, yet sometimes also explosive, insurrectionary, and *silent*—a facet Ziarek keys on in as she

investigates “the destructive muteness” and the “‘pressure of dumbness’ of unrecorded women’s lives and their destroyed bodies” (2-3).

When I say “silent,” I do not specifically mean a lack of speech, and I also am not entirely meaning quietness or a disinterest in communication; rather, I am referring to the moments where words are constrained, where speech is mangled or intentionally withheld, where words do not fully convey the desired meaning and the body can speak more honestly and openly than a learned language. In this chapter, I use Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal* as an illustration of how women’s bodies are prevalent, conveying the kinetic backdrop to which modern dance responds; I also incorporate Ziarek’s claims of “destructive muteness” as I discuss silence as a form of both presence and subversion, spaces where speech is withheld and new forms of communication are relied upon. Beyond both of these facets, I use *Machinal* because of the rhythmic quality of the play’s language, which is indicative of how the protagonist navigates her environment through constrained and liberated movement; I also explore the presence of her silence, or withheld and fragmented speech, which cultivates a dance of self-expression as she resuscitates and invigorates the personal, her character developing her own rhythm and stylized movement.

Though I do not intend to rely heavily on Ziarek, I use her writing to frame the opening of this chapter, because I think her position on feminist aesthetics aligns with how I view the presence of women’s bodies within modernist literature. Ziarek’s opening chapter positions her investigation of modernity as one at the intersection of “‘dumb’ muteness and literary innovation” (2). She claims that “unrecorded women’s lives and

their destroyed bodies, can be transformed into a process of writing, into a possibility of inventing new ways of speaking, community, and acting” (Ziarek 3). Ziarek’s pointed remarks about women’s destroyed bodies is on the periphery of my discussion; however, my immediate focus is, more generally, on the *presence* (albeit destruction in some capacities) of women’s bodies, and by using *Machinal*, I hope to convey the corporeal experience of women and their movement while also envisioning the text as a rhythmic display of the main character’s syncopated dance of identity. Essentially, the main character creates her own language—a fragmented verbosity of omission and silence—to position herself against the mechanical static closing in on her. However, my textual analysis of *Machinal* is merely one example of how women experienced modernity; this analysis is a case study of both constrained and liberated movement, and it is not to dilute the female experience to one monolithic version of femininity, womanhood, or any other identity-markers.

To be sure, this chapter could easily focus on several texts because a number of women in modernist literature locate a physical rhythm within themselves that express the inexpressible. I could examine Janie Starks’ movement throughout Eatonville and her interactions with her husband’s store and the front porch space in Zora Neal Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, women occupy nearly every page, their stories and experiences a contradiction and collection of mutilated, objectified, and sexualized bodies, which accentuates the kinetic backdrop at the nexus of racial identity and the female body. In Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*, Ántonia is at once vibrant, strong, and charismatic, her body resembling the mid-Western landscape as Jim’s

narrative conveys how she tends to her family's farm and awakens to her sexuality. In Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*, the female protagonists walk down busy city streets, expressing the tension of being not black and not white. I share these examples to affirm the complex presence of women's bodies in modernist literature as well as to demonstrate how this chapter could easily entertain a discussion of any of the texts listed above—and more. It would be easy to use *Machinal* because Treadwell writes her protagonist, Young Woman to represent “an ordinary Young Woman, any woman” (whose real name, Helen, is not even disclosed until the final episode) (xi). Her character is a blank slate, a depiction of how women's bodies serve as “textual markers”—an idea I will expound upon further shortly—and it emphasizes a type of broad feminine experience. Because Young Woman invokes a form of physical insurrection that accentuates the fleshy, somatic qualities of the body in stark contrast with the abrupt harshness of the modern, mechanical, and patriarchal world despite experiencing constrained movement. *Machinal* also displays the intersection of Ziarek's “dumb muteness” as well as Elizabeth Grosz's perception of “embodied-experience,” and I think it offers a continuation of how movement signals a form of physicality, self-expression, and autonomy. But most importantly—to clarify why dance and literature have the capacity to intersect—I use *Machinal* because Young Woman's character's actions and speech display a form of movement that is reflective of her identity, functioning as a contentious harmony to the rigid melody that attempts to engulf her.

Though Young Woman's silence is central to this chapter, how she communicates is in conjunction with how she *moves*. I am conceptualizing her silence as a space where

speech is withheld and jumbled, which I would argue is a form of omission. The incoherency of her language can be viewed as her omitting parts of herself and her narrative, which is indicative of intentionally withheld speech—perhaps a mistrust of those around her and a forging of connection with herself by trying to share what she deems true and right. However, I am also considering how these moments of silence are inextricable from movement. As Shaun Gallagher writes, “Language is a modality of the human body. It is generated out of movement” (qtd. in Garner 203). Stanton Garner writes, “The world that language embodies is constituted through and in terms of sensorimotor experience” (203). Garner also shares, “Words, it suggests, emerge from and are constituted by movement. They take form within the body, but as they do so they affect the body in turn, giving corporeal shape to what is indistinct while tuning the body to its rhythms. As they form themselves into poetry—or any language form—they integrate their kinesthetic properties in a grammar of virtual movement” (186). Young Woman’s silence is akin to a dance of physical self-restraint, spaces where she withholds and prevents clarity, moments where she inserts herself into a narrative she creates with her body. Yet, Young Woman is not truly silent throughout the entirety of *Machinal*. She withholds speech in moments, yes, but when she finds moments of freedom and sensuality, a capacity to show ownership over self, she speaks clearly, her voice is said to be beautiful. Though Young Woman’s speech prevents clarity or understanding, her gestures reveal her deeper motivations and thoughts. Dance is embedded within her language because how she speaks, or how she intentionally omits speech, is a physical rhythm, a push and pull of creating, speaking, erasing, and concealing. This physical

rhythm manifests in a form of expressive movement that often contradicts her fragmented speech, conveying a more vulnerable part of her character that is often unable to translate her words. Young Woman's movement allows her to express feeling or meaning that can be translated or communicated through words.

Martha Graham's father, Dr. George Graham, speaks about how people's bodies write their own stories through movement, felt experience, and physical sensation, and I think this concept is inextricable from the disjointed words and movement of Young Woman. Because of how Young Woman's language moves with a tempo of disjuncture, the elisions function as "textual markers" where Young Woman's identity emerges. How does this connect with dance, though? In *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*, Foster insists that "Graham's choice of movement vocabulary derived from a kinesthetic form as one that cultivated the body's dynamic responsiveness to human feeling" (2). Though Young Woman does not invent a new vocabulary, how she communicates is in direct correlation to how she experiences the environment around her. Elizabeth Grosz adopts and expands this idea based upon the theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty on embodied experience. The dialogue within the play is sparse at times, yet Young Woman's silences—and later, her sensual playfulness—conveys a distinct language that is specific to her experience and identity. Young Woman's corporeal "dynamic responsiveness to human feeling," or to state it briefly, "embodied experience," is an example of how women's "dumb muteness" allow for innovative ways of speaking and acting. With Young Woman, her rhythmic omissions and movements are both indicative of her agency, but in a more abstract manner, the

language Young Woman both states, withholds, and openly shares exemplifies a very deeply kinesthetic quality, a language that mirrors Graham's contraction and release.

As Chapter One explicates, corporeal activism was inextricable from modern dance. Similarly, women's bodies—their movement and nonmovement, the practices and rhythms of their bodies—are central to modernist texts for many reasons. As Stephen Kerns argues in *The Culture of Time and Space*, the entire culture was facing a bodily/physical identity crisis as individuals wrestled with what it meant to have their bodies transported across the country in a train, or to watch a film flicker on a screen before their eyes. Similarly, Tim Armstrong also specifies how “modernity, then, brings both a fragmentation and augmentation of the body in relation to technology” (3). In *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A Cultural Study*, Armstrong writes, “The desire to embody and perform is an important part of the story here, a corporeal equivalent of Modernism's slogan ‘No ideas but in things.’ In the modern period, the body is re-energized, re-formed, subject to new modes of production, representation, and commodification” (2). Technological advancement alone was traumatic, yet the lingering ramifications from World War I had an immense effect on how men experienced injury and death. However, the development and aftershocks of the war were not central to the masculine experience alone. As Angela K. Smith writes, “arguably, this war, more than any previous one, became a woman's place, as women from all walks of life were drawn in, both directly and indirectly” (7). Though women did not serve directly in the war, “the First World War gave many women the opportunity to travel and work in ways that no one could have imagined in the first years of the twentieth century” (Smith 18-19). World

War I was merely one component that affected how women gained a sense of agency during the early twentieth century.

To some degree, in hindsight, the temporary autonomy provided by WWI, masked or diminished the fight for suffrage—and the complexities of women yearning for freedom and equality. In *Women, Modernism, and the First World War*, Smith discusses the fictional representations and nonfictional experiences of women from the time, looking at the texts of women who had some tangible connection to the frontlines of the war. While Smith's text depicts women navigating dangerous environments, learning how to move through heavily dangerous and overtly masculine spaces, it also portrays the immense satisfaction many of these women gained in terms of physical freedom, even in spite of the devastation surrounding them. Similarly, in *Modernist Women Writers and War: Trauma and the Female Body in Djuna Barnes, H.D. and Gertrude Stein*, Julie Goodspeed investigates the female body as a “textual marker” in the modernist writings of Barnes, H.D., and Stein on war and its effects on women. Both Smith and Goodspeed offer commentary on the place of women's bodies and the corporeal symbolism of their movement and presence in traditionally masculine places.

Conversations about women's bodies in American modernist literature display women's bodies as fragmented, mutilated, dismissed and/or broken—yet immensely present. While the American modernists have not received the attention that their British counterparts have achieved in terms of women walking and engaging with the city, I hope my discussion of *Machinal* illuminates the movement of women. The physical trauma of war aside, there is very little discussion about how women *move* in American



modernist literature. For example, scholarship on Virginia Woolf abounds, and with that, there is a body of scholarship centralizing on European women walking (or “street-haunting,” according to Woolf) and the figure of the *flâneuse*. In the United Kingdom, conferences and seminars about women walking and experiencing places are in abundance, and perhaps that is the result of the landscape and their modes of transportation; yet, I think that these similar themes about women’s bodies and how they move are also present in American modernist literature, even if there has been little attention to it.

Because the United States is such a large nation and because there is such a disparity between rural and urban landscapes, there is a possible difference in accessibility to “street-haunting”—or women simply having limited access to forms of agency in external-out-in-the-world-movement. It is impossible to solely focus on how women move and function outside of the home, yet these are historically the spaces/places where women have been more policed and regulated. Regardless of public or private spaces, or rural and urban landscapes, when specifically looking at American modernist literature, women, their bodies, and movement are inextricable from how “the female body becomes the primary vehicle for textual insistence on [a woman’s place]” (Goodspeed 5). I agree with Julie Goodspeed’s claim that “the female body stands in as a textual marker or symbol of female identity” (5). This notion is applicable to race, sexuality, and other means of identity-making, because “information is perceived and received from and about the world through bodies...[and it is impossible] to divorce the female body from embodied-experience (Grosz qtd. in Goodspeed 14). To be specific, I

think that the ways women appear in modernist literature and how they engage with the world around them is indicative of how “lived experience resonates in meaningful ways because experience is processed through corporeality and the mind” (Goodspeed 14). With the turn of the century, the fight for suffrage, and WWI, how women forged new aesthetics signal an enriching reciprocity between environment, corporeality, and identity-making.

Women’s movement, of course, is not only a public act, which is another reason as to why I have selected *Machinal*. Treadwell’s text is an excellent representation of an “ordinary” feminine experience for women in modernity, exposing the kinetic backdrop while also heightening the fraught depiction of women as wife, property, and body—a shell that men use mechanically, as needed. The protagonist in Treadwell’s texts is a woman who finds bodily agency through various forms of corporeal movement and physical connection, and the ways she moves within the homespace and the external, public world is indicative of the (feminine) kinetic backdrop of modernist literature. In light of Ziarek’s claims about “dumb muteness,” *Machinal* also portrays a woman whose silence is a form of defiance and who uses her internal manifestations to externally express her rage and insecurity with being confined. The woman in *Machinal* is averse to constrained movement and she pushes against the limitations until she finds agency, a sense of freedom. Most importantly, though, it is through this contestation against restricted movement that Young Woman finds agency, and her dance of stylistic expression becomes a way for her to convey a movement of truth, a corporeal honesty that only the body can signal. As Susan Leigh Foster writes in *Reading Dancing: Bodies*

*and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*, “Dance is seen as an outlet for intuitive or unconscious feelings inaccessible to verbal (intellectual) expression” (xv). Foster continues on to explicate on how both Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault concur that “reading and writing are forms of (bodily) inscription” (xix), and I extend this claim to connect with *Machinal* as an example of how the physicality of language is inseparable from dance and expressive movement. In the moments where Young Woman’s speech becomes sparse and unintelligible, she finds a way to react subversively by rejecting what is expected of her; though the words she utters might appear confusing and disparate, they signal a deeper corporeal language that is longing to emerge—and does emerge in brief, scattered moments when she pays attention to her hands and hair, when she wants to protect her body on her honeymoon or after giving birth, and later when she takes steps towards autonomy by having an affair and then later murdering her husband to get free.

At the start of *Machinal*, the symphony of a mechanical orchestra sets the atmosphere. Treadwell’s play incorporates steel riveting, a priest chanting, “a Negro singing,” and a jazz band—among other sounds—as an attempt to create a poignant, yet evocative portrayal of an early 20th century environment (Treadwell xi). Inspired by the murder trial of Ruth Snyder in 1927, Treadwell’s *Machinal* interweaves Expressionism style and realism. In the play, which premiered on Broadway in 1928, Treadwell uses the murder trial of Snyder to cultivate a drama based solely on one woman: Ruth Snyder. Because Snyder was found guilty for murdering her husband, becoming the first woman to be executed by the electric chair in the state of New York, Treadwell constructs a drama that centralizes the experience of Snyder. The Young Woman’s softness serves as

a startling juxtaposition against the harsh sounds and environment of a quickly advancing modern world.

Using an eclectic variety of sounds, Treadwell depicts the modern world in order to criticize the vastly changing society and its inventions. The sounds of a technological age display the “horror of mechanization” as the “machine processes consistently pervert the individual” (Koritz 551). The presence of the individual becomes conflated and distorted as machines become the focal point for production and consumption, which heightens Young Woman’s kinetic experience and how she navigates the world around her. Treadwell uses the Young Woman as a device to display the dissolution of individuality; as she writes, “the woman is essentially soft, tender, and the life around her is essentially hard, mechanized. Business, home, marriage, having a child, seeking pleasure, all are difficult for her—mechanical, nerve nagging” (xi). As Treadwell sets out to create a specific environment based on the presence of sounds within her play, the Young Woman’s softness in contrast to the mechanical noises displays her inability to fully conform to the quickly changing technological and industrial advancement. Her experiences as a woman and the softness of her body are a contrast to the hardness around her, and because of that, her softness becomes a focal point, which is evident in how her hands are described and continuously discussed. The stage directions state that she has “well kept hands” (Ep. 1, p.1), and the text evidences the care she has for maintaining her hands—the very hands that get her a husband (Ep. 2, p. 20). Young Woman’s character is intended to encapsulate the experience of ordinary women, and as her softness suggests, she, like many women who were overwhelmed by modernity, were

depicted as soft, innocent, lacking even, as their softness becomes a weakness in contrast to the unbearable harshness encompassing them. Treadwell uses Young Woman's softness as a secret weapon; her softness can be perceived as weakness but Young Woman realizes how the softness of her femininity can wield freedom and independence.

Treadwell intends for the sounds of the play to be heard, not seen; the commotion of mechanics and music are often emerging from off-stage, indicative of an urban cacophony, yet physically absent from the presence of the stage. The invisibility of the noise conveys the constant presence of the sounds; they have become familiar, normal even, which indicates how many people have assimilated to the modern world unlike the Young Woman. As Amy Koritz claims, the rhythms of the "machine age force individuals into patterns and activities that homogenize them and destroy those who resist" (Koritz 558). Young Woman is unable to assimilate or accept the mechanical world, and thus, her softness remains, separating her from the mechanizations of work and reality. The conglomeration of confused "inner thoughts, emotions, desires, dreams...cuts [Young Woman] off from any actual adjustment to the routine of work" (1). Her fragmented interiority signal scrambled, incoherent rhythms that both link and separate her from the world around her and those accustomed to the noise and vastly changing world. Young Woman serves as a corporeal juxtaposition to the modern world, refusing to conform, and ultimately being destroyed by her inability to assimilate; however, it is her innate human needs and desires—an undeniable, honest physical response—that leads her to finding love and freedom in her final days.

Given that Young Woman exists within an atmosphere of constant noise—the sounds of modernity, machines, work, and industry—her silence functions as a form of subversion in itself. The points where speech is withheld and the places where she intentionally holds back are moments where Young Woman leaves room for her body to speak, signaling that her omissions hold deeper meaning. In *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, Patricia Ondek Laurence suggests that Virginia Woolf is the first female author in modern literature to practice silence rather than speech (1). Laurence says, “Woolf confronts the narrativity of silence and the cultural constraints of her time” (1). More specifically, Woolf examines the distinctions between the unsaid, unspoken, and unsayable. The unsaid is something that one feels but does not say; the unspoken is something that is not yet formulated to be expressed or vocalized; and the unsayable is something that is not able to be spoken due to social taboos or the words themselves being ineffable (Laurence 1). Silences, then, become deafening because these places of soundless emptiness are felt or noticed. For Laurence, Woolf “confronts and narrates these silences between islands of speech, inviting us, as readers, to enter into the obscurity and to consult our own minds” (1). Applying Laurence’s evaluation of Woolf to Treadwell’s *Machinal*, the presence of silences within the drama displays Young Woman’s abrupt rebellion against the mechanical age. But it is not just simply that these silences function as places of inexpressible feeling—it is the fact that these spaces of the unsaid, unspoken, and unsayable are the moments where Young Woman learns how to develop her own style of expressive movement. Her incoherent speech is reflected in her re/actions: intentional movements. This type of movement is inextricable from her

speaking, yet her special care for her hands or hair signal a deeper expression than her words can convey.

I include this discussion of silence as a connection point to the concept of “dumb muteness,” as I think that Young Woman confronts “dumb” or “destructive” muteness, allowing her silence to function as placeholders. Though silence inherently appears or seems to be a sign of weakness or passivity, Young Woman allows the silences in her speech and the manifestation of her actions to function as linguistic pauses of agency; it is in the in-between spaces, the moments where her speech is withheld that she forges a space for her identity and self. In *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz says, “Bodies are not inert; they function interactively and productively. They act and react. They generate what is new, surprising, and unpredictable” (xi). Grosz writes about how bodies respond and interact with their environment, and Young Woman’s silence is a reaction to her corporeal experience. For example, in the opening scene, the play begins in a busy office, the set design calling attention to the mechanization of an early 20th century America. As the stage directions indicate, the sounds are of office machines: typewriters, adding machines, manifolds, telephone bells, buzzers (1), and these particular noises serve as a constant background rhythm to the characters speaking in this episode. The voices of the Stenographer, Filing Clerk, Adding Clerk, Telephone Operator, and Jones also fill the scene.

ADDING CLERK (*in the monotonous voice of his monotonous thoughts; at his adding machine*) 2490, 28, 76, 123, 36842, 1, ¼, 37, 804, 23 1/2, 982.

FILING CLERK (*in the same way—at his filing desk*) Accounts—A. Bounds—B.  
Contracts—C. Data—D. Earnings—E.

STENOGRAPHER (*in the same way—left*) Dear Sir—in—re—your letter—  
recent date—will state—

TELEPHONE GIRL Hello—Hello—George H. Jones Company good morning—  
hello hello—George H. Jones Company good morning—hello. (Episode 1, p. 2)

This scene is intended to be loud, overwhelming, and chaotic. The rhythm of the workers' tasks—the regularity and synchronization of their work—demonstrates their acquiescence to the inventions of modernity. In “Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal*: Electrifying the Female Body,” Katherine Weiss observes that the office workers have become “mentally numbed or even paralyzed by their machines” (Weiss 7). Their numbness can be perceived as a form of silence, yet their mental and emotional paralysis forces them to only recognize their place and their function alongside the technological machines, which serve as extensions and replacements to their capacities to complete their jobs. The workers have accepted their roles as cogs in a machine, falling into the rhythm of a mechanized symphony.

In 2014, Duke University’s Theater Studies Department put on a performance of *Machinal*. As people filtered into the Sheaffer Theater, jazz music played overhead, immersing the audience prior to the start of play. As the stage lights come on, the jazz music immediately switches to the loud clanging of typewriters. The characters in the opening scene file onto the stage and begin their dialogue, moving in a sequenced cadence, their mannerisms mimicking each other’s. Each time they say “Jones,” the



workers all freeze, all noise comes to a halt, and there is a brief reprieve from the overwhelming constant cacophony of sound. Off-stage, directly in front of the audience, silent workers move in choreographed motion, movement that is akin to an assembly line: one woman mimes filing paperwork, another squats repeatedly as if carrying something heavy, a man paces back and forth as he pretends to shelve books and papers. In the text itself, though there are not necessarily any stage directions—the opening directions state who is doing what task—but as Duke University’s performance indicates, the workers’ movements are a rhythm of work, of hurry and haste.

Young Woman, unlike her coworkers, *reacts* to the harsh, fast-paced environment. Rather than merely accepting and acting in a synchronized manner, she finds a rhythm that, at times, looks slower, more withdrawn and passive, yet still an interactive response in its own right. Young Woman’s reaction can easily be viewed as weakness, but as Onek and Ziarek both write, this aesthetic of muteness, or in Young Woman’s case, this aesthetic of withholding herself is an act of subversion. This aesthetic is not merely a written quality though; it is evident in how Young Woman’s physical body engages with the atmosphere she inhabits and occupies. As Katherine Weiss says, “the sound machines, whether office machines, the radio, the doorbell, subway riveters, or the ringing of a telephone, arouses anxiety in Helen; they represent the bars imprisoning her...(8). Her movement is constrained and regulated, yet Young Woman is continuously trying to break free, which is evident in how she hates to ride the subway and is constantly late for work. In a 2014 from the Roundabout Theatre in New York City, the play opens with a makeshift subway:

Though Sophie Treadwell didn't call for it in the text, the superb Roundabout revival of her 1928 play *Machinal* begins, quite fittingly, with a machine. In very dim light, we perceive a subway car crowded with gray humans lurching and shaking; a woman pushes through the throng, desperate for an exit. You feel her claustrophobic panic, the sense that this hell-tube is apt to crush her.

In the text, Young Woman feeling overwhelmed, exclaims, "All those bodies pressing" and "I thought I would faint! I had to get out in the air!" (Ep. 1). Young Woman's actions are not entirely deliberate, but rather an act of survival that manifests unconsciously, a display of embodied experience and of acting and reacting where she contemplates work, security, safety, marriage, and identity. When considering the place of dance in this text, one can easily envision Young Woman's character breaking free from a chorus of dancers, her movements erratically different and abject compared to the choreography of everyone else surrounding and enclosing her. To withhold speech, and thus to disengage with the expectations placed upon her, is an act of defiance in its own right and it allows Young Woman to engage in movement and action that is autonomous.

Based on Young Woman's actions, Weiss assumes that Young Woman is "still sensitive and tender, and as such, she is able to break out of the subway car imprisoning her, yet her escape merely leads her to the prison walls of the office and into the clutching fat and 'flabby hands' [186] of her employer, Jones" (7). To the extent that Young Woman has limited options available to her, I do not think that "sensitive" and "tender" should be read as derogatory claims against her character. Rather, in the context of the plot, this sensitivity and tenderness humanizes Young Woman; it allows her to still

engage consciously with her humanity, to engage with “the body’s dynamic responsiveness to human feeling” (Foster 2), something that the modern dancers prioritized in a vastly changing culture. In Duke University’s performance, Young Woman’s physical agency and movement increases throughout the duration of the play. When her character first arrives on stage, rushing into the constructed office-space as she is late for work, she is wearing a hat with a mannequin hand attached to the top—signaling her obsessive interest and fascination with her hands. It is also her hands that Jones notices, supposedly making him fall in love with her.

In this performance, Young Woman looks perpetually fearful, stricken with anxiety. She is jumpy, yet also extremely attentive to her hands, often using them to adjust and play with her hair. Young Woman remains like this until the end of Episode One when she gives her first monologue. This monologue is fraught with desperation, anxiety, and a sense of overwhelming fatigue and uncertainty. She paces, jumping back and forth both physically and linguistically, and her hands are a focal point as she massages them together, admiring them in one moment and wringing them anxiously in another. This particular performance depicts Young Woman’s withheld speech with intense expressive movement, her posture of uncertainty and anxiety manifesting with pacing, sharp gestures of contracting at the stomach in a position of agony and fear. As the background sounds continue behind her and her coworkers continue to pantomime typing and filing and phone calling, Young Woman is downstage, displaying an embodied performance of the thoughts and emotions that when vocalized, are ignored by others and when withheld, manifest through gesture and movement. As Martha Graham’s

father shared with her: “Each of us tells our own story without speaking” (Graham 20). Graham and Duncan, among other modern dancers, encouraged a deeply spiritual and physical practice—one that relied on the interaction with oneself, nature, people, and emotional depth and creativity. For *Young Woman*, her reactions to the world around her displays her sensitivity and tenderness, qualities that might appear like weakness, but instead, her (re)actions provide her with moments of clarity, agency, and action—moments of honest expressive movement.

It is these moments of constrained existence and mobility that accentuate the necessity to explore how dance, a form of self-expression and communication, is entangled within the silences and restrictions of *Young Woman*’s character—and how that conveys the kinetic backdrop of modernist literature through the lens of a feminist aesthetics and gender studies. In *Young Woman*’s first monologue, she jumps from discussing marriage, to babies, to money, to begging for someone to notice her, and the absences of coherent sentences display an attempted disruption to the clamorous chaos around her—a call for help. Beginning with her evaluation of her boss, Mr. George H. Jones asking to marry her, her frantic thoughts become vocalized in bursts of fragmented speech; she considers a future with him, and the potential outcomes that could emerge from their union. After this, she considers riding on the subway and the lack of air, causing panic to overtake her again; she shifts her thoughts again to Mr. Jones, nearly hopeful:

....no money — money — George H. Jones —money — Mrs. George H. Jones —  
money — no work —no worry — free! — rest — sleep till nine — sleep till ten

— sleep till noon —now you take a good rest this morning — don't get up till you want to — thank you — oh thank you — oh don't! — please don't touch me— I Want to rest— no rest— earn— got to earn—married—earn—no— yes— earn— all girls— most girls—ma—pa — ma— all women — most women— I can't — must—maybe—must — somebody — something — ma — pa — ma — can I, ma? Tell me, ma — something — somebody. (Episode 1, p. 12)

As her thoughts jump back to Mr. Jones and she considers the positive aspects of marrying him, she begins to view the union amicably. To be married removes the burden of work, and she will be “free” to remain at home. However, considering Ondek’s claims about the “unsaid,” what remains unsaid is her realization of her conjugal obligations to Mr. Jones. When she says “Oh don’t!—please don’t touch me,” the unsaid becomes a visceral reaction to the disgust she feels in having to fulfill her marital duties to the man as her husband.

Realizing that her freedom comes with a price, reducing her body to a mechanized receptacle for pleasuring her husband and producing children, Young Woman perceives the dangers of her situation. In “Tears on Trial in the 1920s: Female Emotion and Style in *Chicago* and *Machinal*,” Jean Marie Lutes states, “The fragmented speech and anguish of her monologues dramatize her struggle to feel properly” (359). I would argue against Lute’s claims here—though I am mainly focusing on the concept of “feeling,” not the idea of being “proper.” Though a mere reading of the text suggests that her character struggles to convey her feelings, Young Woman’s fragmented speech is an excellent illustration of what Ziarek calls the “pressure of dumbness” or “destructive muteness.”

Young Woman wrestles with conflicting feelings—of expressing herself or withholding her true intentions, of staying silent or voicing her true intentions. While Lute is not wrong about Young Woman’s anguish and the dramatization of her fragmented speech, I do not think that should be any indication of her inability to feel. Young Woman is *overwhelmed* by feelings, and she grapples with how to voice her concerns. In a review of The Roundabout Theatre’s 2014 performance, Jesse Green writes, “She [Young Woman] hyperventilates, pulls at her hair, and seems on the verge of tears at all times.” Contrary to Lute’s claims, Young Woman *feels*, but as the back and forth, push and pull restlessness of her monologue renders, she expresses her feelings in a raw, fraught manner.

The raw nature of her feelings are fully expressed through movement and the intensity of her feelings continue to be expressed more readily throughout the length of the play. Though Young Woman’s speech is fragmented most of the play, there are moments where she relies entirely on silence, and times where she speaks eloquently and playfully. In Episode Four: “Maternal,” upon giving birth to her first child, Young Woman sits alone in a hospital room as the clamor of riveting permeates the scene. She is entirely silent in this scene until the very end in which she has another monologue, but prior to that, Young Woman relies entirely on gestures to communicate her dissatisfied grievances. She simply shakes her head ‘no’ and nods ‘yes.’ When her husband visits, he instructs Young Woman to “brace up,” explaining that he knows exactly what she has gone through: “I know all you’ve been through...I know all about it! I was right outside all the time!” (p. 28). This infuriates Young Woman and she makes a “violent gesture of

‘No’” (28) all while Mr. Jones proceeds to offer an annoyingly masculine attempt of insight into her situation.

There are a number of ways to perform this scene, to capture Young Woman’s distress, and I will reference two performances, because I appreciate how they envision her demeanor. In Duke University’s performance, Young Woman is never sitting in a bed, but rather two characters hold a blanket up in front of her as stands, indicating that she’s tucked into a bed. When Mr. Jones enters and begins his obtuse diatribe, Young Woman begins lunging for him as he paces with his back to her. The two individuals holding the blanket restrain her, and she continues reaching for him, desperate to assault him. The sheer animalistic anguish encapsulated in her movements heightens the inner rage that builds throughout the entirety of the play. However, the Florida Players’ rendition is completely unlike Duke University’s performance. In “Maternal,” Young Woman sits upon the bed for the duration of the scene, only moving to signal ‘no’ or ‘yes,’ or to violently point at the door and urge her husband to vacate immediately. Yet, during the monologue, Young Woman finally moves from the makeshift bed. Her movements are sporadic and disparate, at once free and at once constrained. She alternates between pacing and gesturing wildly, to throwing herself back on the bed.

While Duke University’s rendition offers a unique depiction of Young Woman, one that captures the deep well of expression longing to burst free, The Florida Players adequately display the push and pull Young Woman experiences. My argument is not to investigate which performance best represents Young Woman’s character but rather to explicate on how expressive movement functions in *Machinal*. For Young Woman,

expressive movement is consistently a push and pull between silence and assertion, and the embodiment of her feelings and desires are either marinating beneath the surface or on full display, engaged and prominent. The back and forth nature of Young Woman's movements resemble the modern dance vocabulary of Martha Graham, and the idea of contraction and release are illustrated in how Young Woman withholds and expresses feeling. Young Woman longs for freedom throughout the duration of the play, and it is her underlying motive—to be free. In "Episode Six: Intimate," Young Woman has an affair with Mr. Roe, and this scene conveys the culmination of her striving towards freedom, serving as the tipping point which forces her to act accordingly.

Though the most riveting part of *Machinal* is (arguably) Young Woman murdering her husband and being sentenced to death by electric chair, the scene "Intimate" captures a side of Young Woman that has been perpetually diminished or hidden throughout the play. Until Episode Six, her character is merely responding and reacting, her movements a counter to the circumstances she is subjected to, the day-to-day activities she is forced to engage with. However, in Episode Six, Young Woman simply *acts*. Grosz's concept of embodied-experience and her discussion of how bodies continuously respond to their environments is informative to the entirety of *Machinal*, yet this particular scene displays Young Woman embodying her own identity. She is not responding or reacting to discomfort or distress; she is taking charge of her sexuality and bodily autonomy, and the silences that would perforate her sentences instantaneously diminish. At one point, Young Woman says, "I never knew anything like this way! I never thought I could feel like this! So,—so purified! Don't laugh at me!" (Ep. 6, pg. 51).



I would argue that this purification is in direct relation to her ability to communicate freely, her enjoyment of singing and using her voice, and the laughter she finds and engages without throughout the scene. Speaking and talking, as indicated above by Gallagher and Garner, is a full-body experience. In the same vein, singing and laughing are also a deeply physical experience, a movement of the lungs, diaphragm, and intercostal muscles. For example, laughter is a rhythmic noise that emanates from the epiglottis and larynx, but it also activates facial muscles, the diaphragm and lungs, as well as other parts of the body depending on the vigor of the laugh. Most importantly, laughter is akin to a deep-cleansing exhalation: it is an expulsion; it is purifying.

Young Woman's purification is intrinsically linked to her bodily autonomy in Episode Six. The cleansing of her past, of allowing herself to have complete agency over her body, mind, and emotions provides her with the capacity to express, purge, and exhale. With that, this moment of purification also replenishes her and she is able to move artistically throughout the room with her lover. At one point, the stage directions indicate: "She comes into the light. She wears a white chemise that might be the tunic of a dancer...All her gestures must be unconscious, innocent, relaxed, sure and full of natural grace" (Ep. 6, pg. 50). Not only is Young Woman described as a dancer, her embodied stature one of grace and poise, but it accentuates the subsequent *reactions* of her purification. Being able to choose an affair, to determine the course of her evening and a brief moment in her life, Young Woman comes into herself as a person, fully engaging with her identity and claiming ownership of her body and voice. She purges and

exhales the detrimental grip of modernity and patriarchy, accepting herself as whole, independent, pure.

In this scene of expulsion and purification, Young Woman is forced to reconcile the concept of freedom. At one point, the man explains that he kills “a bunch of bandidos” in Mexico, and he justifies his actions by saying, “I had to get free, didn’t I? I let ‘em have it—” (Ep. 5, pg. 40). He repeats or implies this statement a few more times, and it resonates with Young Woman in a provocative way. The idea of freedom convinces her to murder her husband, and while on trial, she confesses her reasoning to the judge, claiming she did it “to be free” (Ep. 8, pg. 75). Young Woman’s act of murder mounts within her throughout the span of *Machinal*, and her character encapsulates a dance of confusion, internal chaos, subversion, and angst. Through the moments where language is withheld or incoherent, to the places where her gestures speak more freely than speech, it is evident that Young Woman embodies the intensity of her emotions by learning to shield herself when necessary and then embracing when she finds contentment and happiness. The tension between these places is directly connected to modern dance as this style of movement heavily relies on feeling and the internal workings of an individual manifesting as expressive movement.

The movement, or rather the stillness Young Woman craved the most, was rest. In her first monologue in Episode One, Young Woman frantically repeated the word “rest,” and this desire for rest prompted her to marry Mr. Jones. Rest is ultimately one of the driving motivations for Young Woman, and that appears in her final moments of life. Though the ending of *Machinal* can certainly be read as Young Woman’s tragic demise,

a catastrophic, horrific finale that signals the loss of hope and restoration, the ending of the play can easily be seen as this inescapable driving force that was bound to trap and destroy Young Woman, and yes, that is part of the ending. I would argue that Young Woman's death is still *freeing*—it is still very much what she longs for. In “Episode Nine: A Machine,” Young Woman affirms how deeply rest has driven her:

YOUNG WOMAN: I sought something—I was always seeking something.

PRIEST: What? What were you seeking?

YOUNG WOMAN: Peace. Rest and peace. Will I find it tonight, Father? Will I find it? (Ep 9, pg. 80).

Death truly is the only option for Young Woman to escape the overwhelming chaos and commotion surrounding her. Not dissimilar from Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, death has a way of offering peace that cannot be obtained otherwise. Even though Young Woman cries out “Somebody! Somebody—” in her final moments of life, I do not think this should automatically be equated with her weakness or lack of agency. Is it indicative of the system set against women? Yes. But that should not automatically negate Young Woman's agency. Rather, it simultaneously illuminates and exacerbates the tension of silence as indicative of oppressive systems and as a form of agency. The consequences of her crime still accentuate the fact that she committed murder to obtain freedom—that cannot be denied or diminished. Young Woman's final moments are constrained, but that aligns with the culture she repeatedly fought against—whether through silence or embodied expression.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **“A Sense of Inertia:” The Dance of Expressive Non/Movement in Zelda Fitzgerald’s**

#### *Save Me the Waltz*

As an adolescent, I was enthralled with the 1920s. I think my obsession with the time period was a result of many years of Jazz-style tap dancing, fringed dance recital costumes, Big Band jazz, and a healthy dose of Lost Generation literary discussion in high school. Somewhere along the way, between a goofy student teacher assigning a heaping amount of Hemingway short stories and an American Modernism class during my undergraduate degree, I started a deep dive into the flapper figure. Though I was fascinated with the allure of 1920s America, I think I was also deeply bothered by what I kept encountering: constrained women. “Hills Like White Elephants” was my first introduction into modernist literature, and while I loved the sparse prose of Hemingway’s text, the female character haunted me, her thoughts and opinions silenced and dismissed by the man. It was something I recognized immensely growing up in a backwards, patriarchal Appalachian community—and something that felt out of sorts with what I had envisioned The Roaring Twenties to be.

As I have come to learn, and as my first two chapters illustrate, there is an obvious tension between the paradigm of the silent/constrained woman and the push for women’s freedom and equality. Though the early twentieth century ushered in women’s suffrage and the 19th Amendment, this era was also coupled with degradation and violence against women—which wasn’t necessarily anything new or out of the ordinary. For as much as women made strides in equality, the underlying current of misogyny and

racism only allowed freedom in small increments. Considering the number of men who rallied against women marching in the streets of Washington D.C. as they fought for the right to vote, it is not surprising that women (primarily white women at the time) held their newfound freedom in hand while continuing to carry the weight of the patriarchy on their shoulders. Women who had access to the promises of burgeoning privileges discovered an amalgamation of physical freedom, intellectual stimulation, and sexual agency, and yet, these freedoms were often coupled with restraint and opposition. The complexity of this fraught discussion is where my third chapter takes shape: I consider how this tension between restraint and opposition might produce forms of expressive movement by extending Martha Graham's vocabulary of contraction and release.

My first two chapters explored the ideas of how twentieth century American women responded to gender oppression and began cultivating forms of resistance. In Chapter Two, I included Ewa Ptonowska Ziarek's *Feminist Aesthetics and the Politics of Modernism*, an investigation into the oppressive nature of sexism and racism within literary modernism and how women responded with their own "feminist aesthetics" in writing. This chapter takes up Ziarek's comments on "the suffragettes' redefinition of the right to vote as the right to *revolt*" (4; emphasis added), in order to demonstrate the lineage of the suffragette and its later iteration: the flapper. Modeled after Zelda Fitzgerald, this figure exudes the same boldness and zeal that she lived and embodied, yet the figure also exudes sentiments of contention.

Zelda transformed the figure into one that exemplified her definition of feminine autonomy and freedom, yet she later rebuffed the figure as it became subsumed by

commoditization/commercialization. In “Eulogy of the Flapper,” Zelda writes, “The Flapper is deceased...It is a great bereavement to me, thinking as I do that there will never be another product of circumstance to take the place of the dear departed.” Zelda later perceived the flapper to be quite restrictive, a figure whose demise was a result of its ideals being commoditized. Lindsey Meyers writes, “For, as the ideal of the flapper became passé in time, the attribution of Zelda as a flapper continued to be fuelled by society, even as she simultaneously rebelled against its stigmatizing limitations.” In many ways, the flapper reflects Zelda’s own journey with identity and expression. As Meyers shares, “...the flapper that was intended to represent a liberating feminine identity ironically became an objectified figure that restricted Zelda’s freedom to realize her self-identity.” Once more, my argument attempts to navigate the complexities of autonomy and constraint, and I use the flapper as a symbol to consider Zelda’s innovative artistry, specifically as it applies to her work as both writer and dancer.

In “Writing Dancing,” Mark Franko shares the intricate overlaps between Renaissance culture and rhetorical forms, specifically focusing on how dance can be read as a text. Though Franko specifically elucidates on geometric dance and choreography, his discussion “outlines the various ways that the body—within its various presentations as a spectacular entity—was also identified as a textual identity” (191). Zelda’s writing encapsulates this concept of textual identity and expressive movement, of personal identity and agency, and F. Scott was sure to silence her, making it impossible for her words to ever come to fruition in any way that would take from his fame. Using the life and work of Zelda, I intend to argue how she manipulated and transformed the figure into

one that exemplified her definition of feminine autonomy and freedom despite experiencing very palpable restrictions imposed upon her, attempting to further confine her. Though Zelda does revolt and embody the ideals of the flapper, “[awaking] from her lethargy...and [going] into battle,” her vigor eventually wanes. The Fitzgeralds’ daughter, Scottie once shared that her mother’s “curse was that she had so much talent it was hard for her to focus on one.” Perhaps this effervescent talent, this perpetual thirst to try and do and be is a form of *revolting*, a manifestation of the persistent longing to embody the flapper and its reflection of freedom and agency. Zelda’s talents were apparent in a number of artforms; she was a dancer, writer, and painter, but I think her striving eventually rendered her static, unmoving, which is evidenced in the breakdown of her body and mind. This concept of non-movement is perhaps apparent in Fitzgerald’s one and only novel *Save Me the Waltz*. I would like Chapter Three to build on Martha Graham’s kinesthetic language, the vocabulary that became central to her version of modern dance. I think this notion of kinesthetic language might be applied to Zelda Fitzgerald’s only novel—a novel that was so deeply reflective of Zelda’s life and struggles, yet was so quickly dismissed, at her husband’s wishes, because both the writing and plot portrayed a deeply intimate and exhilarating version of Zelda that he did not want to relinquish from his own writing.

As I argued in Chapter 2, language is embodied; there is textual movement, but the words—how they are spoken and written, carry the weight of a human’s corporeality. In the Introduction to *The Collected Writings of Zelda Fitzgerald*, Mary Gordon states, “Zelda Fitzgerald’s best prose is brilliantly uneven; her flights are high and wild, and the

form draws its strength from the enigmatic appeal of the fragment...Her descriptions are full of movement: often inanimate objects take on an overvivid and dangerous life” (xviii). Zelda’s language moves with excitement and vigor, and as with Graham’s work with dance, Zelda re-envisioned what writing as an artform could look like when it embodied feminine expression. Zelda’s feminine expression also incorporates exhaustion and resignation; the final section of the text resembles a form of non-movement as Zelda comes to terms with her body’s deterioration, a result of over-extending and striving to the point of futility. Chapter Three combines the work of my previous two chapters, and I consider Zelda’s novel *Save Me the Waltz* as a revisionist work of modernist literature that exudes embodied performance, life as art, and the synergy of dance and words. Zelda’s portrayal of self-expression and identity as presented through the performance of text offers revolt and autonomy coupled with constraint and resignation.

Chapter Three, in other words, explores the intersection of Zelda’s writing and dancing, and how these means of expression not only invigorate a form of embodied performance but are also demonstrative of the links between writing and dance. This chapter intends to explore how Zelda Fitzgerald’s *Save Me the Waltz* is reflective of prose as movement, a lyrically written dance of word and expression. This exploration of reading the text as a dance will also consider how Zelda’s ballet dancing is reflected in her writing, the manipulation of her protagonist’s body mirrored in how she attempts to manipulate genre conventions and perform herself in genres/styles that have prescriptive, oppressive forms/styles.



The flapper is central to my discussion as the figure's journey mirrors Zelda's in many ways: a dangerous popularity that falls victim to tragedy. Prior to her deterioration, Zelda was the living embodiment of the flapper, and her husband, F. Scott Fitzgerald is generally credited with establishing the concept of the flapper, if not the term itself. Fitzgerald, using Zelda's attributes, fashions, and whims, gave life to the figure, populating his literary marvels with female characters that resembled Zelda far too closely. In a review of Fitzgerald's book, *The Beautiful and the Damned*, Zelda famously wrote:

It seems to me that on one page I recognized a portion of an old diary of mine which mysteriously disappeared shortly after my marriage, and, also, scraps of letters which, though considerably edited, sound to me vaguely familiar. In fact, Mr. Fitzgerald — I believe that is how he spells his name — seems to believe that plagiarism begins at home.

Not only were Zelda's words and sentiments extracted, co-opted, and re-purposed, but Fitzgerald stole Zelda's very essence and commercialized her personhood as one for his gain. Her novel then, as a semi-autobiographical work, suggests a compelling revisionist history in which Zelda bares secrets, revealing an interior look at the dissolution and decay she was navigating.

My argument originates at the nexus of the history of the flapper and the literary innovation *Save Me the Waltz*. The figure of the flapper reflects the time period and culture that produced Zelda's writing and experiences. The public persona that she is remembered for underscores the troubling, yet provocative nature of the flapper figure,

while also drawing immense attention to Zelda: Southern Belle, wife, heroine, vixen, dancer, writer. The latter title, of course, was diminished and fraught with contention and bitterness (mainly on her husband's behalf as he prided himself on being the writer of the family). Because of its affiliation with Zelda, my focus on the flapper offers a connection between a figure known for its agency, and Zelda's writing, a novel that expresses the perplexing tension between freedom and restraint. *Save Me the Waltz* is a novel that both reflects and exemplifies the power of dance, as an artform, an act of defiance—an act of survival, rage, and passion that encapsulates a distinctly female experience.

*Save Me the Waltz* is Zelda's only novel, but it offers a clear depiction of her life with F. Scott Fitzgerald. The thinly veiled semi-autobiography provides Zelda with space to write her own account of their life together, yet at the time of its publication, the novel was completely overlooked or dismissed as inferior to Fitzgerald's work. Zelda's writing encapsulates what it was like to perpetually exist in the shadow of her husband. Published in 1932 while Zelda was hospitalized for schizophrenia, *Save Me the Waltz* is a chronicle of the Fitzgeralds' marriage, and it traces their experience from drunken debauchery in New York to the ongoing partying in Paris. While the text is divided into three parts, the third part centers on her ballet career during her time in Paris and is easily the focal point of the novel. The first two parts of the novel closely follow Zelda's actual life, whereas the text assumes a more fictional account during the third part, perhaps portraying an imagined life that Zelda yearned for. Ultimately, the novel concludes on a rather somber note as the protagonist's ballet career comes to its finale.

Zelda's novel masks very little about her own life and struggles, and the only difference between reality and fiction is that Alabama, Zelda's protagonist, moves to Italy to train as a ballet dancer, which can be viewed as longing or regret on Zelda's part. The prose is beautiful, descriptive, and eloquent, but the plot is difficult to follow. In one moment, the narration expresses the excitement of Alabama and her husband, David Knight's, newlywed days, and with little transition or indication, the couple is discussing the arrival of their first child. This fact has been commented on by scholars. "Its structure is loose; it is joined together more by its preoccupations than by any balanced ideas of rhythm or pace" (Gordon xx). *Save Me the Waltz* is episodic, and there are few clear connection points between episodes, which is why the narration can be overwhelmingly difficult to follow. Gordon describes it as a "sensual" novel and about "the young person's creation of self" (xxi), and arguably, this sensual quality is evident in the poetic quality of Zelda's writing.

I would suggest that the disorganized, yet sensual creation of self can easily be linked to the idea of the flapper, a self-created version of womanhood. This idea of embodied performance, or a performance of self, reaffirms the connections between writing, dance, and expressive movement. Like many women modernists, Zelda attempted to break literary conventions, and her prose is best described as lyrical, yet scattered:

Spring came and shattered its opalescent orioles in wreaths of  
daffodils...Alabama dressed In pink and pale linen and she and David sat together  
under the paddles of ceiling fans whipping the summer to consequence. Outside

the wide doors of the country club they pressed their bodies against the cosmos, the gibberish of jazz, the black heat from the greens in the hollow like people making an imprint for a cast of humanity. They swam in the moonlight that varnished the land like a honey-coating and David swore and cursed the collars of his uniforms...They broke the beat of the universe to measures of their own conception and mesmerized themselves with its precious thumping. (41)

Her phrasing is exuberant, bright, vivacious—and then immediately disjointed, a conglomeration of ideas hopeful to emerge, intent on stringing moments and preoccupations together. These sentiments, when considered alongside Gordon’s notion about the “creation of self” and Martha Graham’s postulations about the body expressing utter honesty, denote how Zelda uses her writing as a form of expressive movement. How she writes in conjunction with how she both describes and experiences dance signals the parallels between artforms. In Zelda’s case, she immersed herself in writing and ballet, two male-dominated disciplines, and manipulated the form to her liking, breaking convention and expectations until she could find space to move, breathe, and create.

For Zelda, defining herself was a challenge, and she had to consistently fight against what her father and husband wanted her to be, their paradigms a perpetual restraint on Zelda’s desire for identity and self-expression. In “Zelda Fitzgerald’s Ballet Years,” Meryl Cates addresses the “frequently overlooked aspect of Zelda [which] is her passion for ballet” (1). This passion becomes “an unsustainable fixation,” as Cates writes, a passion and obsession that drove her to succeed as a professional ballerina at the age of twenty-seven. In a conversation with the Fitzgeralds’ granddaughter, Eleanor Lanahan,

Cates learns that ballet offered Zelda “a mode of pure expression” (1). As both Zelda and Alabama come to realize, ballet is an unforgiving, demanding artform. Ballet is taxing on the body, requiring its devotees to overwork their bodies in order to obtain a proper physique that exalts strength, grace, and elegance. As Cates points out, photographs of Zelda during her intense dance years showcase the immense changes in her body: “noticeably thinner, her ankles were delicate and the arches of her feet high” (2). Undoubtedly, Zelda’s drive emanates from a desire to find self-expression, yet it also suggests something darker—an attempt at self-creation that allows her to distinguish herself from solely being a wife (to a famous writer who thrives in the spotlight) and a mother. Cates writes, “[Zelda] continually battled a ‘sense of inertia that hovers over [her] life’ with a devout commitment to her own identity and creativity” (3). This sense of inertia is indicative of both Zelda’s intense persistence and her rapid deterioration—she exists in a state of perpetual motion or static nonmovement and both states are equal extremes.

Reading the sections about Alabama’s physical torment as she trains is difficult when knowing that Zelda also trained as a dancer. It becomes increasingly evident that these experiences, the unrelenting drive, propelled Zelda forward, and Alabama becomes a way that Zelda can process her experiences. As I mentioned earlier, Zelda reviewed Fitzgerald’s *The Beautiful and the Damned*, snarking at him appropriating a page of her diary, and this was a common occurrence that reappeared in *Tender is the Night*. Though *Tender is the Night* does not entertain Zelda’s ballet career, it certainly offers a more sinister approach by exploiting Zelda’s mental breakdowns through the character Nicole

Diver. Fitzgerald's quibbles about his wife's novel were the result of her using their life material to produce her own work, something he had plans for in *Tender is the Night*. In *Save Me the Waltz*, Zelda writes the details of her life in a privileged diary form, an archive of the chronological and experiential happenings of Zelda's life. If the presumptions about Fitzgerald stealing from Zelda's diaries are true (which they undoubtedly are given Zelda's public touting of *The Beautiful and the Damned* and Fitzgerald's meddlesome intervention in ensuring Zelda's book would fail), then Zelda's unveiling in *Save Me the Waltz* allows her to be in control of the narrative, using her source material in a way that is worthy to her. Even more, this archive becomes a representation of feminine expression and the longing to fully inhabit that expression. Zelda showcases her life with the intensity of a ballerina *en pointe*, her movements quick, fluid, at the highest of heights. Gordon claims that Zelda's prose is "high and wild" and "full of movement," and it becomes clear that Zelda's intensity is embodied both in mind and body. The fabricated retelling of her life provides the nuance of sorrow and joy, torment and ambition.

In 1922, Zelda and F. Scott moved to Long Island, New York, leaving the city behind—and hopefully their wild partying days. That hope was short lived, and their home was quickly filled with partygoers. When Zelda's parents came to visit, they were forced to take in the chaotic lifestyle of their daughter and the husband they are still slightly skeptical of. *Save Me the Waltz* includes this incident in the text, and Zelda writes about this moment in a unique manner. Alabama's parents arrive and bear witness to the stream of drunken friends cluttering the Beggs household, and David and Alabama

attempt to quiet the partygoers while Alabama's parents sleep. David ends up partaking in the drinking, and Alabama tries to snatch the bottle out of his hands; David "fend[s] her off," and the "swinging door [catches Alabama] full in the face" making "her nose [bleed] jubilantly as a newly discovered oil well" (Fitzgerald 55). When Alabama awakens the next morning, she has two black eyes and both she and David are fully aware that her parents will believe he has hit her. Alabama's father, the Judge, "blinks ferociously" upon seeing her, but says nothing and then announces they are departing for the city to visit with Alabama's sister (55).

Knowing the semi-autobiographical nature of this text makes it impossible to dismiss Zelda's voice and experience, and this scene reads too much like a diary as Alabama recalls her parents' visit objectively and then immediately expresses her rage when they make an abrupt departure. When Alabama's father says they are leaving, she verbally responds to her father, but the passages of text designated to Alabama's own feelings nearly take over the page. There is sparse verbal dialogue intermittent throughout the passages about Alabama's frustration. Zelda writes, "Alabama had known this would be their attitude, but she couldn't prevent a cataclysmic chute of her insides. She had known that no individual can force other people forever to sustain their own versions of that individual's character—that sooner or later they will stumble across the person's own conception of themselves" (56). These passages indicate Alabama's interiority, but on a deeper level, they expose Zelda's own struggles with her family's disdain and dismissal. Alabama "defiantly" thinks to herself: "Well...families have no right to hold you accountable for what they inculcate before you attain the age of protestation!" (56). The

layered interiority is palpable, Alabama revealing Zelda's frustration. Zelda glosses over the interaction between Alabama and her father, and instead focuses on her own expression. The unveiling of her interiority is the focal point—a flood of emotion, “a cataclysmic chute”—and the dialogue fades to the background. *Save Me the Waltz* with its “high and wild” movement is an *allegro* ballet: an unstoppable force, a relentless inertia. The novel moves at the pace of a dancer incapable of pausing, the movements paired with a hurried tempo. As Zelda describes the “sense of inertia” that drives her, her novel as a reflection of her life and identity resembles this unstoppable movement. Her prose embodies her inability to pause, to slow into *adagio* until she is forced.

As Zelda writes in her novel, “Obligations were to Alabama a plan and a trap laid by civilization to ensnare and cripple her happiness and hobble the feet of time” (97). Though her frustrations were masked through Alabama's narrative, the story of Zelda's familial background and tumultuous marriage emphasize the transparency enmeshed within her novel. Zelda lives in the shadow of Fitzgerald, and she appears to be a devoted, supported wife, yet she also remains entirely her own person. While she might not fully be subsumed into Fitzgerald, solely viewed as wife and property, the tumultuous nature of their relationship suggests that Fitzgerald attempted to squelch some of her fire, hopeful to magnify his own flame and fame. Thus, Zelda voraciously strove to create a name for herself, and while her name is linked to her husband's fame and success, she was hopeful that she could have her own spotlight. Zelda's perceived “sense of inertia” was all-consuming, driving her towards multiple modes of self-expression, though she was repeatedly halted by limitations—limitations that were, in moments, of her own



doing, but overall, these were hindrances imposed by the men in her life. If at any point Zelda created limitations for herself, it was because these limitations were actually the point in which she came to the end of her striving. Zelda's mental and physical breakdown is mirrored in Alabama's reluctant, albeit necessary concession of her dance career.

*Save Me the Waltz* begins with the line: "Those girls" (9). The sentiment is judgmental and harsh, and it can be assumed that it is a blanket statement from the community, a commentary on the wild ways of the Beggs sisters. Alabama Beggs, the youngest child, is inquisitive and preoccupied; she wants to understand herself, even if through the lens of others. "She wants to be told what she is like, being too young to know that she is like nothing at all and will fill out her skeleton with what she gives off...She does not know that what effort she makes will become herself" (11). Alabama longs to achieve self-discovery, and as the text indicates, she wants someone to provide her with the answers. The naivety of this excerpt suggests that women create themselves out of sheer willpower and volition, but Zelda concludes this passage by saying, "It was much later that the child, Alabama, came to realize that the bones of her father could indicate only her limitations" (11). I appreciate Gordon's response to this passage:

The parameters of her journey are the bones of her father's skeleton; there is no flesh to nourish or to knit the bones. Flesh belongs to the mother, and like everything female, for Alabama, it is inferior. The aloof, father-judge is placed by the implacable ideal of pure art; the female, growing in the middle, can only be starved into madness. Alabama's quest for herself is very much of its time; the

flapper, who bound her breasts so she might look like a boy, had to deny her femaleness in order to be freed from what she saw as its constraints. (xxii)

Alabama's character is stubborn and outspoken, pieces of Zelda interwoven into her fictional story of self, and the piqued curiosity of young Alabama conveys the general hardship of women: wanting to be self-made, yet perpetually forced into a paradigm. Zelda's writing recalls the intricacy of her own journey, the desire to forge her own path and identity. As she uses the skeletal structure of a human body as an illustration of identity, her perception of freedom is contingent upon limitations: how the fleshy, feminine qualities of a body poses only restriction while the skeletal system is sturdy, purposeful, resilient. While Gordon reminds us that flappers bound their breasts in order to achieve a masculine persona, I would argue that Zelda does something more scandalous and risqué than that—specifically in reference to the skeleton she is hopeful to fashion.

Anatomically, muscle and flesh have more pliable mobility, whereas the skeletal system itself has restraints. For example, it is impossible to increase joint mobility, whereas one can work to improve muscular flexibility and strength. The range of motion of a joint can be improved when there is muscular or fascia tension, but it cannot be improved if the joint capsule's connective tissue has rigid flexibility—which is the largest contributing factor to one's range of motion. I share this because I want to find an alternative way to read Zelda's words about how Alabama's skeleton will develop. I would concur with Gordon's assessment of the skeleton being predominantly masculine; however, I hope to reconceptualize that idea in some manner. In this particular moment, I

am referring to the text, yet I think this notion is applicable to Zelda. Alabama is hopeful, yet she later realizes how limiting her skeletal structure is—not solely because she’s a woman. Alabama/Zelda realizes that masculinity imposes restraints on women simply because women, the ones associated with fleshy mobility, have more movement, creativity, and vibrancy when they have freedom to move, when they can resist and stretch against good tension, not the limiting kind.

Thus, the skeleton is the actual limitation that connects back to what Zelda writes in *Save Me the Waltz* about Alabama’s bones “indicat[ing] only her limitations” (11). The masculine skeleton is a representation of restraint and limitations, and it becomes the very thing Alabama learns how to manipulate. As her character develops and she grows into a woman, she begins to understand how she is restricted. Early on in the novel, it is abundantly clear that Alabama is already eager to break out of confinement:

There is a brightness and bloom over things; she inspects life proudly, as if she walked in a garden forced by herself to grow in the least hospitable of soils. She is already contemptuous of ordered planting, believing in the possibility of a wizard cultivator to bring forth sweet-smelling blossoms from the hardest of rocks, and night-blooming vines from barren wastes, to plant the breath of twilight and to shop with marigolds.” (13)

Alabama rejects the notion that an individual, or rather, primarily women, must abide or follow a certain structure. As evident here, Alabama is drawn to the unorthodox, the impossible and chaotic. She hopes to cultivate life in the barrenness, and if that means she must break conventions, she is willing to both manipulate and resist conventions.

As Alabama's skeleton is fashioned, or to be more specific, as she grows into herself, she is happy to be the "wildest" of the Beggs sisters. Alabama exclaims, "I give a damned good show!" The bones of her father are meant to confine and withhold her, yet she is determined to be true to who she wants to be. After Alabama marries David Knight, she "lay thinking in room number twenty-one-o-nine of the Biltmore Hotel...David David Knight Knight Knight, for instance, couldn't possibly make her put out her light til she got good and ready. No power on earth could make her do anything, she thought frightened, any more, except herself" (43-44). The power and determination embedded in this section illustrates Alabama's fire—her insistence that she is unwilling to yield to anyone. Yet, at the hands of men, she is constantly forced to yield, to withhold, to withdraw.

Alabama discovers feminine power through dance and creativity, yet she becomes a ballet dancer, which is a form of dance that is often taken to represent confinement, restriction, and constraint. Her experience as a dancer perfectly resembles Zelda's work as a writer—entering into a male-dominated space with paradigmatic conventions. As those limitations are imposed upon women, oftentimes, the only way to respond is to *manipulate* those limitations. When Alabama is introduced to ballet as a potential outlet for her creativity, she realizes that there is a certain thrill in taming and controlling the human body. "Alabama's excitement rose with the appeal to the poignancy of a human body subject to its physical will to the point of evangelism" (106). Initially, there is an obsession with what she can do to her body: tame, fashion, control, and manipulate it:

It seemed to Alabama that, reaching her goal, she would drive the devils that had driven her—that, in proving herself, she would achieve that peace which she imagined went only in surety of one's self—that she would be able, through the medium of the dance, to command her emotions to, summon love or pity or happiness at will, having provided a channel through which they might flow. She drove herself mercilessly. (118).

She seeks out ballet because she has lived enough to “be fed up” (115), and dance offers her an outlet, something to push against, it is a tension that she can stretch and fashion by abusing and training her body.

Through Alabama's character, Zelda chronicles her experience as a dancer by using writing as her mode of expression. Zelda's writing invigorates a “sense of inertia,” or a “cataclysmic chute” by creating a body of text that embodies striving and dedication. Zelda wrote *Save Me the Waltz* in 1932 when she was hospitalized for her mental illness, and at that time, her inertia was static, unmoving. The desire to once again spring forth, to embody an *allegro* performance of a ballerina, lingers throughout her novel. Being bound within a state of nonmovement, Zelda encapsulates the vigor of a ballet dancer, embedding herself into the passion of the text and the passion of Alabama. In a time where Zelda might have felt unable to discipline her mind, to silence her racing thoughts, she turned towards the expression of control, towards a character who finds how to manipulate limitations and explore the intricacies of freedom intermeshed with constraint. If Zelda cannot literally dance because of the mental and physical toll, she will pour that desire into Alabama's ballet career.

While the pioneers of modern dance found ballet to be restrictive, Alabama finds the practice of ballet to offer her both constraint and freedom, which is fitting as this theme encapsulates the limitations of her life. Though “her lessons were agony” (117), Alabama continues to push herself, which pleases David, who is “glad of her absorption at the studio” (117). Alabama finds something that is solely her own, an art that can simultaneously consume and destroy her. If she cannot find freedom, then she will self-generate it by controlling and tormenting her body until it can create and reflect artistry. “The human body was very insistent. Alabama passionately hated her inability to discipline her own. Learning how to manage it was like playing a desperate game with herself. She said to herself, ‘My body and I,’ and took herself for an awful beating: that was how it was done” (118). Learning how to fashion her skeleton requires a type of dedication that Alabama unearths in her discipline, a skill that she also faults herself for lacking.

Arguably, the ballet dancer is seemingly dissimilar from the flapper. The ballet dancer employs rigid, formulaic, and controlled movement, whereas the flapper is known for her sexual promiscuity and physical liveliness as she displays bobbed hair and scandalously exposed ankles. Yet, I would argue there is overlap between the flapper and the ballet dancer, and Alabama conveys this overlap through her creation of identity and self-generated movement; Zelda invigorates the creation of identity by writing about her experience as a ballerina. As Alabama conveys, her desire to be a ballet dancer emerges from being “fed up” with her life (115). Arriving at the Olympia Music Hall for her first lesson, she experiences the mockery from the young, fit dancers. Madame interrogates

Alabama, wanting to know why she could possibly want to dance since she has both friends and money.

“You are too old. It is a beautiful ballet. Why have you come to me so late?”

“I didn’t know before. I was too busy living?”

“And now you have done all your living?”

“Enough to be fed up,” laughed Alabama. (115)

Alabama longs to find meaning with her life, and no aspect of marriage, motherhood, and incessant debauchery/European travel can fully offer her substance. As Gordon writes in the introduction to *Save Me the Waltz*, the flapper is “an artist; the form is the public dramatization, the material is herself” (Gordon xxii). Alabama uses her body as the vessel in which she cultivates and establishes her artistry. “Wasn’t any art the expression of the inexpressible?” (121), Alabama asks when David says he does not understand her obsession with ballet, the artform in which Alabama finds expression—even if momentarily, the endeavor being futile.

The argument, though, is not about whether ballet dancers and the flappers share the same vision for women; rather, it is about how these forms allow women a medium for expression, self-generation, and autonomy. The flapper could easily be seen as having more freedom, yet for those who enjoy the practice of ballet, one might have a stronger connection to freedom through constrained movement. The novel allows for a contrast between ballet dancers and flappers, or perhaps writers and dancers, but each of these artforms have the propensity to offer a medium for self-creation. In returning to the skeleton metaphor, it is obvious that Alabama has many points of restraint, which include

the obligations to her husband and daughter: familial responsibility. However, Alabama learns which limitations are actually a form of good tension, a type of tension that encourages friction in order to produce deeper movement and robust mobility. Alabama strains against the limitations imposed by social decorum and patriarchy, her familial and social obligations, and most importantly, her own limitations:

A growing feeling of alarm in Alabama for their relationship had tightened itself to a set determination to get on with her work. Pulling the skeleton of herself over a loom of attitude and arabesque, she tried to weave the strength of her father and the young beauty of her first love with David, the happy oblivion of her teens and her protected childhood into a magic cloak. She was much alone. (122)

Perceiving how very much alone she is and how utterly critical David is of her success, Alabama pours herself into the only thing that offers any form of satisfaction. “To succeed had become an obsession,” (Fitzgerald 144), the longing to be something, to create art, and to find herself.

The incessant “sense of inertia” lingers on every page of Zelda’s novel, but in the passages where Zelda shares about the demons driving Alabama, the text carries a heightened sense of meaning. No longer are the words on the page merely a story; the words start to carry the weight of an embodied performance. Reading the descriptions about Alabama’s nonstop training depicts her character as relentless, and it becomes difficult to extract Zelda from her character:

Alabama’s work grew more and more difficult. In the mazes of the masterful fouetté her legs felt like dangling hams; in the swift elevation of the entrechat cinq



she thought her breasts hung like old English dugs. It did not show in the mirror.

She was nothing but sinew. To succeed had become an obsession. She worked till

she felt like a gored horse in the bullring, dragging its entrails. (144)

As Alabama critiques her body, this section harkens back to Meryl Cate's description of Zelda during her more intense dance years where Cate draws attention to Zelda's slimming figure and her tiny, muscular ankles. In this passage, the text portrays the desperation of a woman who needs to find satisfaction and identity in her art, and unfortunately, that perpetual inertia carries her from *allegro* to *adagio*, an abrupt shift to suddenly stopping that is both alarming and disorientating.

Through this abrupt shift, Alabama discovers that the drive to succeed is both exhilarating and taxing. "Alabama's eventual failure to realize her career in the novel is due to a foot injury...and her disillusioned return to a moribund relationship with David indicates the difficulty of such an enterprise in the male-dominated society of the 1930s" (Delesalle-Nancey 103). Shortly after returning to Paris, Alabama learns about her father's illness, and David, Bonnie, and Alabama visit Montgomery so that Alabama can say goodbye to her father, the Judge. Her foot injury, coupled with her return to David sends her into a reflective space, which forces Alabama to pepper her dying father with existential questions:

"I thought you could tell me if our bodies are given to use as counterirritants to the soul. I thought you'd know why when our bodies out to bring surcease from our tortured minds, they fail and collapse, and why, when we are tormented in our bodies, does our soul desert us as refuge?...Why do we spend years using up our

bodies to nurture our minds with experiences and find our minds turning then to our exhausted bodies for solace? Why, Daddy?” (185)

The Judge does not have answers, and Alabama later wonders if “we are all just agents in a very experimental stage of organic free will. It cannot be that myself is the purpose of my father’s life—but it can be that what I can appreciate of his fine spirit is the purpose of my own” (185). The skeleton that Alabama had tirelessly fought against returns in this moment, entirely reconceptualized as a type of determination and grit that is inherently masculine, a spirit, or trait, that she has inherited from her father and developed as her own to fit her drives and desires. Despite this acknowledgement, Alabama is still deeply bothered by what it means to succumb to exhaustion, to realize that the ceaseless struggle often produces little in return. Perhaps that is the ever-present struggle for all of humanity, but for Alabama, it reminds her that the body is merely a reservoir. She says, “It’s very expressive of myself. I just lump everything in a great heap which I have labeled ‘the past,’ and, having thus emptied this deep reservoir that was once myself, I am ready to continue” (196).

*Save Me the Waltz* concludes in an irresolute, paltry manner with Alabama and David sitting together, yet distant after her father’s passing. Like F. Scott and Zelda, there is no attainable happy ending for Alabama and David; there is no reconciliation or hope for their relationship. Yet, Alabama’s final words insist that she will continue in her attempts of self-creation, and as Zelda wrote this novel while hospitalized, it is an affirmation that her work as an artist was not finished—she would find a new outlet through embodied writing. Ballet consumed Zelda, and through her fiction, it also

consumed her protagonist; it provided an outlet in which Zelda/Alabama could drive herself to a consistent breaking point, where she could see progress and master a craft—even if that craft is now lumped into the past, meaningless. As Linda W. Wagner writes in “‘Save Me the Waltz’: An Assessment in Craft,” “...Alabama tries to substitute defiance for sorrow...” (205). Despite the seemingly desolate ending, between physical and relational death, Alabama’s, “I am ready to continue” signals hope for herself. For *Zelda*, *Save Me the Waltz* was her once again re-working self-expression through art. Through ballet’s intense training and the beauty of physical expression, Zelda/Alabama find a glimmer of identity. In the novel, Alabama traces that identity to her father, the masculine skeleton, but she can also see the figments of that fire in herself; she recognizes how her father’s skeleton has fashioned her, but like any woman confined by patriarchy and ready to break free, she learns to strain against limitations and fashion herself as she sees necessary and fulfilling.

Of course, *Zelda*’s novel toes the line between autobiography and fiction, her words encapsulating the devastation and immense sadness of a woman trapped in obscurity and heartbreak. Alabama became a vehicle in which *Zelda* could unveil her harbored secrets, and *Save Me the Waltz* reads like a performance of self. Though *Zelda*’s experiences mirror Alabama’s in the novel, *Zelda* never trained in Italy, and unlike Alabama’s meager foot injury, *Zelda* faces a cataclysmic breakdown of both mind and body. *Save Me the Waltz* is a manifestation of expression, a performance of sheer hope and imagination. David’s criticism is perpetual, admonishing Alabama for her commitment, her supposed negligence as a wife and partner (though his faults are never

recognized, of course), and her changing body as her muscles tone and strengthen. In some ways, David's constant criticism of Alabama's body is connected to F. Scott's criticism of Zelda's body of writing, which is something Catherine Delsalle-Nancy explores in "Writing the Body: Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald's Resistance in *Save Me the Waltz*." Delsalle-Nancey claims, "The very writing of the novel can be seen as the literary equivalent of Alabama's grueling training of her body to shape it into an artistic creation" (103). Alabama's body is the tool that becomes trained and regulated, something that she learns expression with, and David is undoubtedly jealous of her commitment.

Unlike Alabama, Zelda's attempts at self-creation were futile. Zelda's novel received very little attention at its publication, and *Save Me the Waltz* is still fairly unknown, aside from Fitzgerald aficionados. Delsalle-Nancey writes, "Thus the novel, whose style has often been criticized as excessively verbose and labored, can be seen as a corollary to Alabama the character's heroic yet failed attempt at self-validation" (103). In a highly offensive comment from Matthew J. Bruccoli, he writes: "*Save Me the Waltz* is worth reading partly because anything that illuminates the career of F. Scott Fitzgerald is worth reading..." Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin responds by saying, "...such an attitude...is sharply illustrative of what Zelda was trying to fight in her marriage, that which might be seen as the very *raison d'etre* of her novel..." (23). I think the varied commentary on *Save Me the Waltz* exemplifies the complexities of the novel—and of Zelda, a woman confined by a patriarchal society who longed to generate agency and form her own identity.

When a reader comes to the end of *Save Me the Waltz*, it is no longer possible to separate Zelda from Alabama, the reality and fiction of the story intermingling until Zelda's voice breaks through. As Alabama says, "I am ready to continue" and that she has "emptied this deep reservoir," it seems to speak to Zelda's own deterioration. *Save Me the Waltz* is her cathartic purging; it is a corporeal reckoning of her experiences and she releases them both metaphorically and literally. The novel concludes in a way that alludes to Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*:

They sat in the pleasant gloom of late afternoon, staring at each other through the remains of the party; the silver glasses, the silver tray, the traces of many perfumes; they sat together watching the twilight flow through the calm living room that they were leaving like the clear cold current of a trout stream. (196)

Zelda wrote these pages from a place of solitude and confinement, and these sentiments linger throughout this passage. Her "sense of inertia" is a pendulum that swings quickly from high to low with abruptness, and that sensation is invigorated here as the imagery evokes both static nonmovement and fluid movement. Alabama and David are at once sitting calmly and flowing like a stream, and like Zelda, this illustration captures her physical confinement, yet her emotional vigor and striving. Zelda's inertia was ongoing, a continual dance of high and low, fast and slow.

Zelda's writing encapsulates this concept of textual identity and expressive movement, of personal identity and agency, and F. Scott was sure to silence her, making it impossible for her words to ever come to fruition in any way that would take from his fame. Though Zelda's ballet career was ended by the mental, emotional, and physical toll

of arduous dance training, she embedded the narration of that experience into a new artform, her corporeal experience becoming a textual performance. Despite the somewhat dim ending of *Save Me the Waltz*, both Alabama/Zelda have cultivated a textual identity, the fashioning of a fleshy skeleton—a working *body* of art that exemplifies the power of defiance, leaving the past behind and watching it recede, something like boats beating against the current.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “The Essence of Life Seemed Bodily Motion”: Dancing While Black

On a free night in December 2018, in between checking out *The Ferryman* and *My Fair Lady* for a class that pertained to a week of play-watching in NYC, I made it a priority to visit the New York City Center for a performance of Alvin Ailey’s *Revelations*. After bouncing from one performance to the next and being fueled by adrenaline and such limited time, encountering *Revelations* live required intention and engagement. Stepping into the theater, I was an outsider in many ways—a white woman in a sea of rich, lively color. I took my seat at the end of the row next to an older couple, and at one point, the woman turned to me and asked if it was my first time seeing the show. I nodded, and we made small talk about my trip to NYC. When the show was near starting, her wrinkled brown hand covered mine, squeezing it gently, and she told me that I would thoroughly love the show. And I did.

As I write this in 2022, I have a richer appreciation for what it meant to gather in a theater, a space full of people—people from all races and ethnicities gathering together to appreciate with awe and wonder. In an unfamiliar city, I was grateful for the woman’s welcome, her kindness. I *am* grateful for the narrative of dance, the one that uses the medium all humans share, and though the coloring of these bodies can create such hostility and division, in some moments, the connection between very different groups of people also offers healing and reconciliation. I loved having the opportunity to see *Revelations* live—especially now, after a year and a half when live performance was halted, dangerous, even. The 2020s have reminded us of the inequity and systemic racism

embedded within American history and culture. As Alvin Ailey exalted the voices of black dancers, choreographers, and collaborators, he also shared how *Revelations* is meant to celebrate African-American legacy past, present, and future<sup>1</sup>. Ailey's fascination with past, present, and future inspired his dance troupe's dedication to celebrating African-American history and culture. In a moment of time where our ability to engage with live performance has been halted due to COVID-19, I offer this chapter as a celebration of Afro-modernist performance and embodied expression.

To celebrate the rich history of African-American culture—as well as the devastation—it is vital to recognize that the history and culture of black Americans immensely reflects trauma, perseverance, and triumph. With that comes sacred protection of how these Americans want their history and future narrative to be shaped and told. As a white woman, I position myself as an ally, someone who wants to advocate for racial reconciliation and to commemorate the cultural contributions that have shaped African-American literature and dance. Currently, as I work on a pilot program for anti-racist pedagogy, I consider how this pedagogical approach allows for the black vernacular (among many other native tongues) to be preserved. In the same way that Standard American English attempts to homogenize, and in moments, hegemonize those who participate in other forms of English or are non-native speakers, I wonder how often dancing black bodies have been exoticized, discouraged, instructed to assimilate. People of color have felt and experienced what it means to be policed, to have their body and

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<sup>1</sup> Lincoln Center. "Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater: Chroma, Grace, Takadame, Revelations." *YouTube*, uploaded by Lincoln Center, 4 June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UCsv5QlFo2Q>



existence surveilled, oppressed, abused—and yet, celebratory black art still radically permeates the margins, loudly, colorfully, beautifully emerging as proud and vital.

I want Chapter Four to celebrate this diversity despite the deeply traumatic origins of African-American art and history. As this project connects the movement of literature and the physical movement of self-expression, Chapter Four is both a continuation and a culmination of how dance can be read into literature and how embodied expression is at the essence of identity, in all of its variations: gendered, racial, sexual, etc. In this final chapter, race is at the forefront, because it is an area that deserves a chapter of attention. In fact, though, the notion of race has lingered throughout my previous chapters, and as suggested in Chapter One, the exclusive nature of modern dance prompted the emergence of other variations of modern dance. For black American dancers who responded to modern dance, their racial identity was crucial to their artistry and how they used their bodies to tell the story of both individual and collective history. The essence of Chapter Four has been threaded throughout this project, and in many ways, it is illustrative of American culture: a group of people who have existed in the margins and have been yearning to emerge. Yet, my hope for this final chapter is to illuminate how the margins eventually transform the center and manifest themselves loudly. If eventually, the margins *will* be heard, what does that mean for art, specifically dance and its means of self-expression, when we can recognize the beauty of one's identity and all it represents? My hope is that Chapter Four conveys how dance is a rallying cry for the silenced, for those who find their story inexpressible through words.

This chapter furthers my previous discussions about expressive movement, and embodied performance and literature, yet adding the discussion of race transforms the issues we have traced so far. In Chapter Two, the character Young Woman's silenced words are transmitted to murderous action; in Chapter Three, *Zelda/Alabama* manipulates the limitations enforced upon her/them. Considering these notions of subversive silence and obfuscated inhibitions, I consider the ways in which black artists wrestle with this concept. I think it would be foolish to suggest that any type of art produced by a person of color automatically generates liberation or freedom—or promotes antiracism. Yet, there is a sense of power and autonomy when underrepresented populations produce content, art, innovation that is reflective of their culture, their communities.

Thus, my concluding chapter explores how race, as a form of identity, can cultivate dance styles and forms of movement that provide autonomy. As this chapter begins with an anecdote from my experience at the New York City Center watching *Revelation*, my discussion on Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, hopefully contextualizing how to read dance in text and dance as text from the perspective of race gives way to a conversation about dance performances from Josephine Baker. My reading of Baker's physical, performative texts and Larsen's literary text explore the intricacies of inhabiting a body of color. When the body is the means of measuring and perceiving truth, it becomes clear how much honesty exudes corporeally when bodies speak. Chapter Four explores how dancing black individuals use dance to embody, speak, and express the inexpressible and the elisions that manifest when someone is prohibited from fully

inhabiting their body and lived experience. These elisions, as a reflection of the margins, can fully be expressed through embodied performance.

Conversations about race cannot exist without acknowledging how past, present, and future exists and functions simultaneously, the weight of each intricately linked and bound within the other. In issue 53.3 of *Dance Research Journal*, Rebekah J. Kowal reflects on Christina Sharpe's *The Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Sharpe's text interrogates the representation of contemporary Black life as she considers "the wake," a space where the past, never fully past, continues to rupture the present (Sharpe 9). Sharpe further defines living in the wake as such:

Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies while even as that terror is visited on our bodies the realities of that terror are erased. (Sharpe 15)

Sharpe's work articulates how "the past not yet past" invades contemporary Black lives, and Kowal uses Sharpe's work to consider how "the metaphor of 'the wake' [evokes] a consciousness that encompasses the past, present, and future—all that remains in the long afterlife of Atlantic chattel enslavement" (Kowal 3). Kowal emphasizes the importance of including Sharpe in the issue's discussion on research and movement, claiming, "I reference Sharpe's work as a gesture toward a standard of care to which we are holding ourselves as dance artists and scholars in the wake of our disciplinary racial reckoning and movement for social justice" (3). This sentiment shapes Chapter Four, but it also

reaffirms how dance, an act of self-expression—both individual and collective expression—is a powerful tool for transformation.

Similarly, in the special issue 53.2 of *Dance Research Journal*, entitled “Arms Akimbo: Black Women Choreographing Social Change,” Guest Editor, Nadine George-Graves writes about how “black women have been at the forefront of era-shifting social change” (2). In “Look At My Arms! - Editor’s Note,” George-Graves continues, “Dance has always been more than choreography. Movement has always moved minds as well as bodies. Black women in dance traverse myriad aesthetics, skills, emotions, politics, epistemologies, and identities to produce vast and complex performance histories” (2). George-Graves acknowledges the problems with a “special issue” on black dancers: “Valuing Black women and Black feminisms in Dance Studies should not be a “special topic. I offer this issue as an invitation to concentrate on some discussions about the nexus of dance, race, performance, gender, class, politics, ontology, and value” (2). I intend to honor this approach; as my previous chapters have explored the links between gender, dance, and embodied performance, I aim to extend these links to include race. In other words: how do we write about the bodies that dance in conjunction with their identifiers? How does dance make space (both metaphorical and physical) for new voices to exist and articulate thought and feeling through the movement of bodies? These questions do not have a singular answer, nor can attempting to answer these questions negate the trauma that coincides with issues of race.

While these questions can posit a way of thinking and understanding that illuminates how dancing bodies engage with various modes of embodied performance,

there should also be consideration for the limitations of identifiers. Identifying as a woman can mean being perceived as subservient; identifying as a person of color might result in othering. This project wrestles with those identifiers—what happens when women inhabit their identifiers and express the inexpressible parts of themselves through movement? It is easy to imagine that there are limitations in how we identify and what that suggests about how we navigate spaces. In *EmBODYing Liberation: The Black Body in American Dance*, Thomas F. DeFranz asks in the Foreword, “But do dancing black bodies always dance black?” (11). DeFranz writes about the shift towards performance studies and cultural studies and how these disciplines have incited new ways of watching and encountering dance. “This shift in critical writing...allows us to consider what particular dances *mean*, across time periods and geographies, for their dancers and audiences” (DeFranz 11). DeFranz argues that it is impossible to “compress elaborate cultural practices into a neat package” (12), and he contends that there is a distinct difference between dance as expressive movement and social dance—or dances performed in a performance space (a white space). Similarly, in *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*, Susan Manning states:

By ‘blackness’ I meant the social and artistic meanings that adhere to dancing bodies that can be read as marked by the culture and history of Africans in the New World. By ‘whiteness’ I mean the social and artistic privilege that adheres to dancing bodies that can be read as racially unmarked, the legitimizing norm against which bodies of color take their meanings. (Manning xv)

Finally, in *Done in Dance: Isadora Duncan in America*, Ann Daly acknowledges that Duncan “effectively constructed the genre of American modern dance as whiteness” (qtd. in Manning xxiii). Not dissimilar from DeFranz, these authors also posit how black bodies “have had to struggle for acceptance in a dominant white aesthetic in order to gain status and legitimacy within the body politic” (Goeller et al. 22). While I do not intend to negate the idea that black bodies are forced to engage and perform in predominantly white spaces, I do want to circle back to DeFranz’s question about whether black bodies always *dance black*.

To frame DeFranz’s musings, I turn now to a black artist initiative established in the late 2000s that spurred a dance troupe and coinciding journal in 2017. In 2008, Paloma and Patricia McGregor started Angela’s Puse, a black-led artist organization that was inspired by their mother’s work as an artist and activist.<sup>2</sup> Angela’s Pulse, affiliated with Barnard College, also produced a community-initiative entitled “Dancing While Black,” which emerged in 2017. According to the history and values listed on their website, Dancing While Black is an “initiative that supports the diverse work of Black dance artists by cultivating platforms for process, performance, dialogue, and documentation.”<sup>3</sup> A performer with DWB is quoted on the website: “Dancing While Black means my blackness is me, but not all of me.”<sup>4</sup> In the inaugural issue of the journal that extends the performative side of DWB, Paloma McGregor writes, “Most of this work has happened in person because we know showing up, bringing our bodies into the space,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://barnard.edu/profiles/angelas-pulse>

<sup>3</sup> “Dancing While Black.” <http://angelaspulse.org/project/dancing-while-black/>

<sup>4</sup> “DWB”

is foundational to what we do.”<sup>5</sup> McGregor then includes an image (Figure 2), which prompts a consideration about the relationship between blackness and whiteness.

As McGregor explains, this image was presented while she took a class on “Understanding and Undoing Racism” and she was forced to grapple with what the boxes meant. Though she offers no answers about her original thoughts, or what she learned in the course on racism and survival, she does share this:

That conditioning is why this journal—aimed at centering Blackness—includes a consideration of whiteness. Because our Black bodies are conditioned by their necessity in relationship to whiteness. In the image above, the white space needs the black dots to form itself, to become [a] box. By extension, the formation of white spaces—inclusive of studio, census form, the law and perhaps most complex, the imaginary—requires Blackness to define its edges. This journal is for us, Black and centered, with white at the edges. This formation, this coming together is to collect ourselves, is an exercise of great will, imagination, trust, and course. Though Black dance artists are currently receiving unprecedented opportunities in white spaces, we know from history, the news, and our own bodies’ fatigue, that these “opportunities” are too often conditional and too rarely nourishing.

DWB, then, attempts to center itself, to emerge from the margins proudly as a cohort of black dancers, but this positioning also allows other questions to emerge—questions that coincide with DeFranz’s own thoughtful supposition.

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<sup>5</sup> “On Beginnings,” *Dancing While Black Journal*.  
<http://dwbjournal.angelaspulse.org/chapter/introduction/index.html>

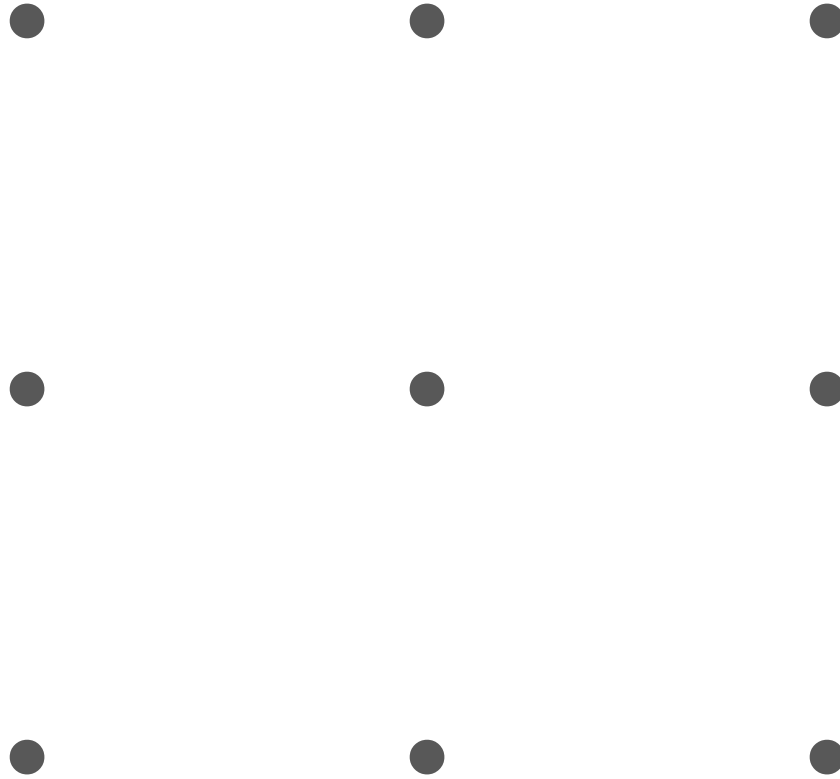


Figure 2: Boxes from "Understanding and Undoing Racism"

Perhaps what DeFranz's reflections suggest is that dance is a tool of communication and with that, it can have the power to negate other identifiers or



signifiers. While one of the members of DWB described how the performance cohort allowed them to engage with their racial identity, they did not feel subsumed by it. I do not believe that DeFranz intended to diminish racial identity when he asked if dancers always danced black, but I think he was considering a larger issue—will black dancers be perpetually othered when dancing in white spaces? And also, when dancing for themselves (or outside of concert dance spaces), is it a performance of black culture, or simply a performance of self? I think my previous chapters can shed light on this conversation. Martha Graham embodied her femininity but it was not all that she was, and I think that sentiment resonated with a number of other modern dancers. This idea can be extended to race: black dancers can embody their racial identity without that identity being all that they are, negating the other pieces that make up their identity as a whole. My consideration of Josephine Baker and the protagonist in *Quicksand* (as a fictionalized representation of author Nella Larsen) offer two distinctly unique negotiations with racial identity. For Baker, she learned how to manipulate the stereotypes associated with Black culture through dance; for Helga, the protagonist in *Quicksand*, her divided racial identity causes her to shift back and forth between black and white, and a momentary release through dance is at once healing and repulsive. Thus, these two examples are indicative of racial identity and embodied performance.

Embodied racial identity can be expressed in a number of ways, but I think as evidenced by the scholars and performers mentioned thus far, African-American history is innately embedded in the expression of many black dancers. These dancers become receptacles for “the past not yet past,” or in other words, they become living archives that

carry the past and present of African-American culture in their movements. In “Samba: The Body Articulate,” Barbara Brown writes, “[There] is a strong lyricism grounded in racial identification...A person can say these things in so many words. Or a person speaks with the body” (42). The idea of speaking bodies is not dissimilar from the discussions in my previous chapters; however, racial identity can alter the body’s ability to speak—or modify *how* the body speaks. In “Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham,” Anthea Kraut writes, “In any event, there can be little question of the historical importance of black vernacular dance as a potent site for both dominant and resistant constructions of racial identity” (450). Kraut’s essay explores how “dancing bodies participate in historical change,” yet she also addresses how dance is rarely taken seriously as a valued academic discipline. Recognizing the limitations of the field, especially as it is an ephemeral artform, Kraut posits how “one cannot divorce dance from the other domains with which it is often embroiled, whether cognate performance modes, like theatre, or other analytical fields, like anthropology” (437). Kraut extends these other analytical fields to include African American studies, American studies, and cultural studies, emphasizing the importance of understanding “the choreographic treatments of black vernacular dance as they intersected with the contingencies of audience expectation and reception and broader socio-historical forces” (Kraut 436). As Kraut denotes, the black vernacular of dancers like Baker and Dunham reveal a different approach to embodied performance—specifically, it reveals or magnifies racial identity, how it is expressed through movement, and most importantly, how one’s body speaks

and conveys an embodied performance of self. While the work of Katherine Dunham is noteworthy and vital to the field of black dance, I would like to focus my attention on Josephine Baker as her career aligns with that of the Harlem Renaissance and the novel *Quicksand*. Baker embodied her racial identity while also subverting its confines, demonstrating a poignant negotiation with race, gender, class. How these identifiers converge and diverge give way to how she established herself as a dancer and performer—she was willing to embody, destroy, and rebuild the racial constraints imposed upon her while invigorating the links between the Black vernacular and Black dance.

Freda Josephine McDonald, later becoming Josephine Baker, was born on June 3, 1906 in St. Louis, Missouri to entertainers. Her parents' work as performers (albeit unsuccessful ones) shaped Baker's engagement with performance. As her parents struggled to make ends meet, Baker worked odd jobs, and eventually took up street-dancing to earn money. Her routine garnered the attention of an African-American theater troupe, and at the age of fifteen, she left her parents behind and began performing with the group. Around this time, Baker also married, officially becoming "Josephine Baker." During the early 20th century, Baker excelled in Vaudeville, and her career eventually led her to performing in New York City just as the Harlem Renaissance was taking off. In *Josephine Baker in Art and Life: The Icon and the Image*, Simon Njami delineates the various forces that pressured Baker to leave America in 1925. Though Harlem was a mecca for Black culture, it was becoming increasingly more dangerous and violent as racial tensions escalated. As Njami describes it, "The suffering of an entire

people was her suffering” (xii). Leaving the United States for Paris provided Baker with immense freedom and popularity.<sup>6</sup>

In Paris, Baker introduced France to her *danse sauvage* where she performed at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in *La Revue Nègre*. As Morgan Jerkins writes:

Hordes of white Parisians flocked to the famed theater to the *La Revue Nègre*, a musical show that emerged from France due to the country’s fascination with jazz culture. And there, wearing little more than strings of pearls, wrist cuffs, and a skirt made of 16 rubber bananas, Josephine Baker descended from a palm tree onstage, and began to dance. This dance—the *danse sauvage*—is what established her as the biggest black female star in the world.<sup>7</sup>

On October 2, 1925, Baker performed her first *danse sauvage*, originally clad in a feathered belt, which eventually morphed into a banana belt. Jerkins notes the evolution of the banana skirt, stating, “And though, in later years, her banana skirts would transform from rubber fruits to a powerful, aggressive spike version, that initial design remains revolutionary.” In “Dialectics of the Banana Skirt: The Ambiguities of Josephine Baker’s Self-Representation,” Alicja Sowinska writes, “Initially made of rubber, and rather playfully in tone, the banana skirt gradually became glittering, then pointy, eventually turning onto strategically-placed, menacing spikes that all-too-obviously invoked mental associations with male organs. Thus, she girded herself with ‘phalluses’ catering to European sexual desires and fantasies of savage primitivism” (Sowinska 51).

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<sup>6</sup> Jerkins, Morgan. “90 Years Later, the Radical Power of Josephine Baker’s Banana Skirt,” *Vogue*. 3 June 2016. <https://www.vogue.com/article/josephine-baker-90th-anniversary-banana-skirt>

<sup>7</sup> Jerkins. “90 Years Later...”

For Baker, being in Europe provided her with autonomy, though she was still very much subjected to the male gaze. She knew how to optimize the white (male) gaze, harness it to her advantage, and manipulate the stereotypes associated with the primitive black female body.

Much is written about Baker's banana skirt, the costume that emphatically connected her and her body with primitivism. As Jerkins writes, both Beyoncé and Rihanna have paid homage to Baker by revitalizing the banana skirt in modern fashion. Baker's performance apparel is inherently linked to her dance career, and while scholars and critics alike have commented on her actual dance talent, there is little discussion on how her movement is indicative of a way of speaking, a language. Some scholars have discussed how her movement is associated with Black vernacular, yet I would argue that there are limitations when solely defining Baker's dance style as linked to this style of language. Though Baker's dance style is inspired by Black vernacular, I do not believe Baker ever allowed herself to be boxed in by a distinct style—she consistently pushed at those limitations, making the movements her own. Kraut writes, “Unlike Hurston and Dunham, Baker neither wrote nor directed nor produced the shows in which she appeared, and choreographers were customarily brought in to create routines for her. Her ability to assign her own meaning to the dances she was performing was thus limited. Still...Baker was the author of the dance moves she executed” (437). Kraut later states, “...she was generally forced to adhere to proscribed conventions for black dancers, Baker developed ways of distancing herself from the stereotypes even as she reproduced them”

(437-38). Baker participated in the assigned discourse she was meant to perform, yet she consistently modified it to fit a performance of self.

Baker's dance performances were linked to primitivism, yet her dance style lingers at the threshold of modernism. In "Dance That 'Suggested Nothing but Itself': Josephine Baker and Abstraction, Joanna Dee Das claims, "[Baker's] dancing depended not on the music, but rather helped produce rhythm" (2). Dee Das's essay attempts to offer a revisionist history of Baker's dance career by considering her as a leading innovator of modernism in Paris. Dee Das claims that, unlike Katherine Dunham who embraced primitive modernism, Baker does not fully follow this approach. Instead, her controversial performances were uncontainable, uneasily defined. As Anthea Kraut puts it, Baker's dance styles were "repositories for African retentions and transformations" (Kraut 440). Michael Borshuk suggests that Baker "was able to diminish the negative power of governing stereotypes and discursive impositions by situating herself at the exaggerated limits of those distorted representations, thus revealing the illegitimacy of white concocted notions of Negro primitivism" (qtd. in Farfan 55). To put it lightly, Baker's performances were revolutionary.

The banana skirt—in Paris, the *only* costume worn by Baker—is infamous; her comedic, exaggerated facial expressions hinted at her Vaudevillian upbringing; the primal movements her body gesticulated and performed—conveyed a parodic imitation of what the white gaze hoped to see. Baker's career manifested at the threshold of the Harlem Renaissance, and though she was treated far better in Paris, the subversive nature of her dance performances still warranted American attention. To consider Paloma

McGregor's interpretation of Figure 2 in conjunction with Baker is interesting. Baker identified as Black and she incorporated the movement of Black vernacular into her dance performances, but she constantly collapsed or skewed the boundaries and limitations thrust upon her. If Baker was meant to function as a black dot illuminating the shape of the whiteness, she collapsed the shape and reinvented it to her own liking. The choreography that she was intended to follow came to life—revitalized, reimagined—and she manipulated her body to subvert the white gaze that she was meant to entertain. By doing so, she expanded and invigorated what was conceived to be primitivism and Black concert dance. Baker possessed a confidence in her body and racial identity, even if she might have privately struggled with existing in a Black female body that was subjected to objectification and racial injustice. This project has sought to explore how women's experiences might share resemblances, but the essence of embodied performance is singular. That sentiment rings true when considering how Nella Larsen conceives of racial identity and embodiment in her semi-autobiographical work *Quicksand*.

Nella Larsen, born Nellie Walker on April 13, 1891 in a poor district in Chicago, was the daughter of Danish immigrant, Pederline Marie Hansen, and Peter Walker, a man who was believed to have been mixed-race from the West Indies. Larsen was an American novelist most known for her two novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), and was an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance and the field of American Modernism. Her novel *Quicksand* is largely autobiographical, and though unlike Zelda Fitzgerald's semi-autobiographical work that exposes an unhappy marriage, Larsen's

fiction focuses more on the racial and class dynamics she experienced by marrying a man affiliated with Harlem's black professional/upper class. Writing about Larsen's fiction, Thadious M. Davis states, "Larsen represented a spatial economy in fictions of the modern color line in which black Americans accommodate their lives to segregation even while pushing against the boundaries of urban, middle-class life" (106). Larsen understood the complexities of being a woman of mixed race, and both *Quicksand* and *Passing* contended with issues of race and gender as well as fluidity and mobility in urban spaces.

According to George Hutchinson, Larsen knew the struggles of racial division and a contradictory sense of self, which created a number of elisions in how Larsen's story has been told. Hutchinson writes,

I grew interested not simply in how wrong the current story of Larsen's life turned out to be, but in how much of the actual life one could reconstruct, and how, in the process of doing so, one kept happening upon aspects of the past hidden by common assumptions or mere lack of curiosity. This is partly because Larsen was a black woman professional, but also because, like her most important fictional characters, she nearly always inhabited the space between black and white, by necessity and by choice. That space, her fiction itself testifies, is hidden. I kept stumbling upon troves of overlooked documentary evidence concerning Larsen's youth and adulthood. In large part, it had been missed because of the neglect that has long characterized black, women's, and working class history—and many of the archives that might support work in these areas. (9)



I include this excerpt from Hutchinson's *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* as I think it exemplifies the elisions present in Larsen's *Quicksand*.

In *Quicksand*, the somber, dismal mood is embedded throughout the pages, and though this feeling encapsulates the reading of the text, there is also the sense that, as a reader, one will never fully understand or engage with Helga. Larsen wrestled with her identity, or how she could or could not categorize her identity, and Helga becomes a vehicle in which Larsen attempts to start processing her own interiority. If that is the case, I think there is a possibility that Larsen either self-censors, or her own struggles manifest through Helga's thoughts but are not fully recognized. These ideas offer a way in which Helga's character can be considered. The elisions in the novel are spaces where meaning is inexpressible through words and the silence is loaded, effervescent with possibility, yet removed and detached. For Larsen, the heaviness of the African-American past in conjunction with her divided identity inhibits her ability to live transparently, or fully accepting of her identity and station, and those sentiments become integrated into her novel's protagonist. As Hutchinson indicates, Larsen's story has lacked fullness and development—many details have been hidden, not necessarily because Larsen intended for that, but because being a woman of color rendered her story hidden, unwarranted. That sentiment lingers throughout *Quicksand*. If Larsen felt the weight of not fully inhabiting a space as she struggled with her identifiers—black, woman, low-income—how might her literature capture these moments of silence, spaces where words cannot capture feeling, meaning, or significance because they have been caught up within the “quicksand” of a white America.

Larsen's first novel, *Quicksand*, is a novella about Helga Crane, a woman who is half-black and half-white, and a divided existence that weighs on her sense of belonging. Because she is unable to fully identify fully as one race, she is also unable to define who she hopes to be. This sense of interior division coupled with her deep shame and underdeveloped sense of self forces her into a life of perpetual dissatisfaction. Being mixed-race informs how she understands herself and the world, leading her to become an insatiable peripatetic who longs to find home somewhere. Constantly torn, her interiority is shaped by her inability to feel at home in her body—or a race. Having no place to belong, Helga is constantly searching for home, identity, and solace, something she never finds. However, Helga finds a brief moment of release, a catharsis of sorts, when she encounters dance and allows her body to feel free.

The presence of dancing bodies is brief in *Quicksand*, but this moment of expressive movement becomes a way for Helga, specifically, to exert agency and to find a means of transparency. It is a moment of ownership and connection with inhabiting a black body and experiencing the thrill of connecting with black culture, yet following the experience, she is immediately distraught. There is no solace, no happy ending, yet there is a pocket of hope when Helga engages in expressive movement that reflects physicality and sexuality. Helga's moment of expression ends with sorrow. Her character conveys the inescapable presence of a collective history, the trauma of African-American history is haunting, encompassing her embodied performances; despite this fact, it is in this moment of release and connection where Helga experiences transcendence, identity, a glimpse at hope. These experiences are sublime in some ways because they offer what it

means to find and honor one's own identity—no matter how tumultuous or murky that concept is to find and hold onto.

The ideas of expressive movement—or mobility in general—are interesting to consider in conjunction with the title of the novel. Quicksand is an inaptly named substance because it is actually more of a mud or clay, not necessarily sand. It can be tricky to recognize because, at first glance, it generally appears hard on the surface. Though quicksand is not as dramatic or dangerous as it has been purported to be, it still can pose a risk if someone encounters it. In reality, quicksand does not actually pull people under. Humans float in quicksand, and with slow, intentional movements, a trapped person can escape. Though it is a myth that quick movements cause a person to sink faster, panicked movements can make it more difficult for a person to escape. Small motions encourage water to slowly flow towards the origin of the movement allowing a person to break free.<sup>8</sup> In the case of the novel, Helga's movements are consistently panicked and flighty; she fears being overtaken, feeling herself becoming stuck and trapped, so she jerks violently as the sand solidifies around. The only time in the novel in which Helga is momentarily free, not consumed with thoughts of being trapped or longing to flee, is when she dances. The dance scene acts as a space of intentionality, release, and freedom. She does not recognize how she has freed herself, and the experience is so entirely physical and raw that when she finally returns to the present

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<sup>8</sup> Bakalar, Nikolas. "Quicksand Science: Why It Traps, How to Escape." <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/quicksand-science-why-it-traps-how-to-escape>. 2005 September 28.

moment, she panics, furious to break free, which immediately traps her back in the quicksand.

Because Helga feels torn in who she is and how she engages with the world, the narrative of *Quicksand* contains spaces where understanding is prohibited, her feelings and thoughts not fully expressible. In some ways, Helga occupies the margins of the margins, further accentuating the heaviness of the text. There are moments where Helga is aggressively fumbling, panicked and determined to not be overtaken by quicksand, and it becomes evident that the weight of unbelonging, the feeling of being rejected, unwanted, and ashamed prevents her from finding solid ground. When meaning cannot be expressed or understood, it becomes a film or a fog, prohibiting clarity. *Quicksand* is indicative of inexpressible feelings that obfuscate understanding, and I think one way in which these inexpressible feelings appear is when Helga refers to her loneliness—which she longs for and is depressed by. The times where Helga waffles between wanting connection and wanting to be alone suggest a deeply divided interiority that cannot be fully understood by her or the readers of the novel. Her loneliness, a sign of never being at home in herself, envelopes her, functioning as spaces in the novel where meaning, or clarity, has been consumed by “quicksand.” At the opening of this novel, Helga’s unhappiness is apparent. The first line states: “Helga sat alone in her room, which at that hour, eight in the evening, was in soft gloom” (Larsen 1). The opening line sets the trajectory of the novel, encompassing the text with a somber mood. Helga is perpetually alone or experiencing loneliness; it is a recurrent feeling that is never too far away.

In the “soft gloom” of her room, she appears distant and forlorn. The language used in Larsen’s text to describe her room emphasizes how utterly alone Helga is: “It was a comfortable room, furnished with rare and intensely personal taste, flooded with Southern sun in the day, but shadowy just then with the drawn curtains and single shaded light. Large, too. So large that the spot where Helga sat was a small oasis in a desert of darkness. And eerily quiet” (Larsen 1). Helga craves “intentional isolation,” which for her, manifests as an incapacity for self-actualization or full transparency (Larsen 1). She oscillates between longing for community and seeking out isolation, neither of which ever offer her comfort (or at least not long-term comfort). Her desire for isolation seems to emerge from a place of self-sabotage and self-rejection, which is why I insist that these feelings prevent her from wholeness and self-acceptance. Fearing rejection and overwhelmed by shame, she removes herself from situations so that she can avoid rejection, which in turn, subjects her to loneliness. The shame of her identity, or a feeling that she lacks a complete identity, drives her to situations that make her feel alone. The concluding lines of the text reinforce this haunting sense of loneliness as Helga, after barely recovering from the birth of her fourth child, discovers she is pregnant for the fifth time. Despite being the mother to almost five children, she remains alone, only married out of convenience and desperation.

This loneliness permeates the text. The short novel feels *heavy*. The opening scene, accentuating Helga’s isolation, is merely preparation for the misfortune that follows. In the epigraph to Larsen’s *Quicksand* is an excerpt from Langston Hughes’s poem “Cross.” The epigraph reads:

My old man died in a fine big house

My ma died in a shack.

I wonder where I'm gonna die,

Being neither white nor black? (Hughes qtd. in Larsen 1)

Hughes's poem encapsulates the mood of the novella as Helga is plagued by similar sentiments. When the novel opens, and immediately following the somber tone of the epigraph from "Cross," Helga is agitated. Helga is driven by a disorienting sense of dissatisfaction and disdain, which skews her capability for self-acceptance. The moment Helga encounters joy or contentment, she finds it impossible to hold onto. At the start of the novel, Helga is teaching at Naxos, a fictionalization of the Tuskegee Institute, and she feels "hot anger and seething resentment" (Larsen 3). Though she thought she would find contentment at Naxos, it was short-lived, as a result of the institution being forced to assimilate to the "white man's pattern" (Larsen 4). The text reads: "This great community, she thought, was no longer a school. It had grown into a machine. It was now a show place in the black belt, exemplification of the white man's magnanimity, refutation of the black man's inefficiency" (Larsen 4). "The South. Naxos. Negro education. Suddenly she hated them all. Strange, too, for this was the thing which she had *ardently desired* to share in, to be a part of this monument to one man's genius and vision" (Larsen 3; emphasis added). In a dynamic that is cyclically perpetuated throughout the novel, Helga's *ardent desires* begin with good intentions but quickly disintegrate, whether that is the result of perceiving racial injustice or recognizing her

own inability to assimilate to either white or black culture. The perpetual, unending drive to find contentment with her identity leaves her insatiable and miserable.

Helga's disdain for Naxos weighs upon her in the early pages before she abruptly quits her position and leaves for Chicago. As she sits in her room, ruminating on her hatred for Naxos and Negro education that has been coopted by white hegemony, she longs for "soothing darkness. She wished it were vacation, so that she might get away for a time" (Larsen 3). In this scene, Helga continues to sit in dim lighting, oscillating between "a disdainful smile or an angry frown" (Larsen 4). Overcome by emotions, Helga is momentarily passive here. The text signals Helga's disdain with Naxos, which is a representation of a system that Helga feels trapped within. Helga's sedentary ruminations depict her as paralyzed by emotions, yet the reader only catches glimpses of her desperation—both in this scene and throughout the novel. For a paragraph, Helga is described as sitting with either a smile or a frown. The interior and exterior surroundings are recounted in detail—"a little clock ticked," "a whippoorwill wailed," "a breeze parted...silk curtains" (Larsen 4). Helga remains motionless, "she [does] not shift her position" (Larsen 4). She does eventually move: "At last she stirred, uncertainly, but with an overpowering desire for action of some sort" (Larsen 4). She leaps up, flips on the light, and dumps her "school-teacher paraphernalia of drab books and papers...[flinging] them violently, scornfully toward the wastebasket" (Larsen 4). As Helga goes from passive sitting to violent action, this scene illustrates Helga's incongruencies, the panicked, flighty movements of someone who is trapped, sinking in quicksand, yet

utterly unable to see a way out. She is either stationary, nearly content, or abrupt, panicked, and flailing.

Helga vacillates quickly from one extreme to another because being in a liminal space of division is in keeping with her identity. She must assimilate to white or to black; occupying liminal spaces is too reminiscent of being mixed race. “She could neither conform, nor be happy in her unconformity” (Larsen 7). This division, laid out early on in the novel, exposes Helga’s divided interiority. Helga does not feel comfortable, safe, or even capable of fully occupying her body. To her mind, being alone, without family is the cause of her misfortunes. “No family. That was the crux of the whole matter. For Helga, it accounted for everything, her failure here in Nasos, her former loneliness in Nashville” (Larsen 8). This feeling of loneliness follows Helga everywhere she goes. It blinds Helga to seeing herself fully, to giving herself permission to occupy space—even if not fully white or fully black. After Helga’s mother passes, her uncle sends her to a “school for Negroes, where for the first time she could breathe freely” (Larsen 22). Though Helga finds momentary peace with herself, this feeling eventually wanes, and it is replaced with “discontent for which there [is] no remedy... She had been happier, but still horribly lonely” (Larsen 22). Helga wields her loneliness as a line of separation, a form of armor that she can use to keep a distance from others—and also herself. After Helga makes the decision to leave Naxos, she intentionally skips breakfast, which is generally a time for the entire school to gather. A concerned fellow English teacher, Margaret, drops by to check on Helga, saying, “You never tell anybody anything about yourself” (Larsen 13). Margaret adds that James Vayle, Helga’s fiancé, does not even know of Helga’s



whereabouts, which further underlines this sentiment—that Helga maintains this line of separation from others. Helga eventually tells Margaret about her imminent departure, but Margaret’s statement exhibits how this fog, this haziness to Helga’s person, prevents people from knowing her or from her knowing herself. Her loneliness, which manifests as deep dissatisfaction, renders her distant, unapproachable, and disconnected.

As Margaret leaves Helga’s room, Helga thinks about being “no longer concerned with what anyone in Naxos might think of her, for she was now in love with the piquancy of leaving” (Larsen 14). This decision establishes Helga’s trajectory as an insatiable, lonely peripatetic. As I claimed earlier, Helga’s *ardent desires* propel her forward in a decision, yet they quickly dissipate. While attending the school for Negroes as a teenager and discovering that black skin does not make one “loathsome,” she finds herself “as happy as a child unused to happiness dared to be. There had been always a feeling of strangeness, of outsideness, and one of holding her breath for fear that it wouldn’t last. It hadn’t” (Larsen 22). Helga’s experiences have taught her to approach happiness with hesitation, and this response amplifies and sustains her negative views of self. She anticipates rejection and loneliness, and those feelings prepare her to flee. Helga’s inability to accept herself, or to extend kindness and compassion to herself, result from watching her mother struggle with racism and poverty, and from not having a family. Because Helga lacks a family of origin, and because that lack has established Helga’s inability to find a sense of home in her own body, Helga’s transience is her attempts at finding “home,” a place where she can be herself and where she can be with people who think like her. While this perpetual seeking is useless without her acceptance of herself,

her body, and her racial identity, her mobility does embody a sense of subversion. Helga's transience, in other words, is not all bad, nor is it all detrimental. Though the disparities of an unjust America serve as the backdrop to the novel, Helga's mobility accentuates her freedom while contrasting her subversive movement next to her lonely, dissatisfied seeking. How Helga wields her mobility is connected, and perhaps a catalyst, for her brief, yet empowering encounter with expressive movement.

In "The New Negro Flâneuse in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*," Jeanne Schepper addresses how expressive movement might be transmitted through the concept of mobility. Recognizing the limitations forced upon Helga, Schepper explores Helga's "strategy of resistance," a strategy Schepper believes to be mobility. Schepper's opening lines addresses how black bodies are policed:

*Quicksand* (1928) represents the many ways that black women's movements are policed: by the law, by educational institutions, by racism, by Jim Crow segregation, by the race and gender ideologies of Empire, by the social strictures of white, black, and European society, and by the institutions of marriage and family...These negative limitations represent the containment and fixing of identity that Larsen contrasts with the expansion of identity promised both by geographic mobility and the facts of social relations...[Larsen] opposes the containment of any given place and any given social location against the expansiveness of acts of movement and relocation. (Schepper 679)

Like the other examples of expressive movement and embodied performance throughout this study, Schepper's discussion of mobility is viewed as a form of resistance or

liberation. Specifically, Schepper focuses on the figure of the *flâneur*, feminizing the masculine character: *flâneuse*. “Larsen delineates the material complexities of that quintessential figure of modernism, the *flâneur*, or public stroller and mobile observer of modern effects. As a woman on the move, Helga Crane represents something at times imagined to be impossible, a modern *flâneuse* or female *flâneur*” (Schepper 679). Though Helga’s mobility signals a form of resistance or liberation, her movement is also heavily constrained. Schepper compares Helga’s movement to a migratory bird, saying that she is perpetually “caught and then escaping” (683).

Schepper attributes the limitations of Helga’s mobility to gender and race—amongst a slew of other identifiers that hinder her movement—and concludes that Helga’s transfixed identity is only positioned to acquire “the possibility for agency” (693). In “Intimate Geography: The Body, Race, and Space in Larsen's *Quicksand*,” Laura E. Tanner constructs a similar argument about bodies and movement, yet she primarily considers how Helga is unable to fully inhabit her body, or more explicitly, “Helga is locked out of her lived body even as she is trapped in the object body that comes to define her” (180). Using Edward Casey’s discussion of body and place relationships in *Getting Back into Place*, Tanner establishes how the lived body is a “body understood not just as a material object but as a locus of perception and intention” (180-81). Inhabiting the world with a body of color is complex, and it often negates the capacity for an individual to embrace and fully reside within the lived body. As Tanner writes, “The racial epidermal schema threatens to dislocate the lived bodily experience,

overwhelming the body/world dialectic by pinning the black subject to an object corporeality owned by the gaze” (181-82). In the context of *Quicksand*,

Helga’s mixed race background consistently forces her to inhabit a series of liminal spaces, including the space of her own body...Even as it liberates her from the social structures that would oppress her, however, Helga’s performative sensibility alienates her from the embodied experience of her own subjectivity.

Her geographical wandering throughout the novel reflects her search for a home she never experiences in her family of origin or in her own skin. (Tanner 186)

Though my reading of *Quicksand* emphasizes the way that Helga re/acts and harnesses movement as resistance, it is impossible to ignore just how little agency Helga has in moments simply because she is dislocated from the lived bodily experience.

This concept of being disconnected or dislocated from her lived body is merely an additional layer to Helga’s interior complexity. Unable to access full emotional transparency, Helga opts for physical/emotional expression through fashion. In Naxos, Helga identifies as “a despised mulatto,” and begrudgingly attempts to conform to the ideology that: “Black, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people” (Larsen 16). Helga is in staunch opposition to this mentality, believing that “bright colors *were* fitting and that dark-complexioned people *should* wear yellow, green, and red” (Larsen 16). Upon deciding to leave Naxos, Helga sits down with the principal, Dr. Anderson, informing him of her happiness. One of her primary motivations in leaving is the “suppression of individuality and beauty,” which generates ramifications by whitewashing the school’s occupants (Larsen 19). Helga embraces individuality

through fashion and dressing her body in bold colors and patterns, which offers her the opportunity for her to work towards a lived bodily connection—even though she never fully grasps this. Helga can physically fake self-acceptance, using clothing as a means of establishing her sense of self, but she repeatedly realizes that her body is prison, her loneliness and divided interiority holding her captive to self-acceptance; her body is a prisoner, her racial identity holding her captive within a racist culture.

After Naxos, when Helga ventures to Chicago to hopefully reconnect with her (white) uncle, her uncle's new wife is repulsed by her husband's kin being of mixed race. With her husband away, she ensures that Helga is never to return, claiming, "And please remember that my husband is not your uncle. No indeed!" (Larsen 26). Helga stumbles out the door, feeling like "an obscene sore in all their lives, at all costs to be hidden" (Larsen 27). Chicago greets her with rejection, but "oddly enough, she felt, too, that she had come home. She, Helga Crane, who had no home" (Larsen 28). This sentiment—an affirmation of her unending loneliness—sets her on a cyclical trajectory of relocation: Helga flees a place in a state of unhappiness and dissatisfaction, arrives in a new place and finds momentary contentment, and then she is once again forced to face the instability of her racial identity—what it means to inhabit a body, an existence, that is never fully *at home*. Helga moves from Naxos, to Chicago, to New York, to Denmark, to New York, to rural Alabama, and the only thing that keeps her in Alabama, unhappily married, is the desire to help her children feel loved, though she considers fleeing before she discovers she is pregnant for the fifth time. As Tanner notes, Helga is truly incapable of accessing the fullness of her lived body. Her body is a prison; her body is a prisoner. It

is impossible for Helga to feel, to experience, to want without the reminder of being trapped, alone, and unwanted by herself and society. Even in the final scene, Helga is made prisoner by her body as it carries new life, another child that forces her to accept her fate in Alabama.

In her article about Helga as *flâneuse*, Schepper encapsulates Helga's desire for movement and agency. She longs to be unhindered, and upon arriving in New York, Helga obtains a momentary reprieve from the "tantalizing oppression of loneliness and isolation which always it seemed, had been a part of her existence" (Larsen 42). Helga's sense of autonomy is amplified when she is able to engage in mobility, perusing the Harlem streets, entirely disengaged from "the white world...that had stolen her birthright" (Larsen 42). As Helga participates in Harlem's city scene as a *flâneuse*, she is initially entranced by the city, but eventually, the same feeling of loneliness returns. She begins to feel immense resentment towards her New York friends, hating their inconsistent opinions about race, wondering, "Why must the race problem always creep in?" (Larsen 48). Helga's loneliness, her experience as a prisoner in her own body, is a result of how her body is perceived and treated socially and culturally. Helga occupies this liminal position when it comes to race because she oscillates in her opinions. While at her all black school as a teenager, and later when she is living in New York, she is initially thrilled to be included in black society. In New York, after spending a year listening to her community's incongruencies—their hating white people but mimicking their style and culture—she no longer wants to "be yoked to these despised black folk"

(Larsen 50). And that becomes evident in the seconds following a moment of unadulterated self-expression.

While Helga starts “mak[ing] plans and [dreaming] delightful dreams of change, of life somewhere else...where at last she [will] be permanently satisfied” (Larsen 53), she attends a dinner-party turned night-out in Harlem with friends. They venture to a jazz club, and though Helga feels “singularly apart from it all” (Larsen 54), she starts to dance:

They danced, ambling lazily to a crooning melody, or violently twisting their bodies, like whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstatically to a thumping of unseen tomtoms. For the while, Helga was oblivious of the reek of flesh, smoke, and alcohol, oblivious of the oblivion of other gyrating pairs, oblivious of the color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it all. She was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra.

The essence of life seemed bodily motion. (Larsen 54)

The text does not describe how or why Helga is motivated to dance; assumedly, she merely follows along with the group she is with. Perhaps she is persuaded to join, perhaps she is entranced by the affective environment of the club, overwhelmed by music and bodies mingling and dancing; the text offers no clarity on Helga’s motives, yet it reveals a vulnerable part of Helga, one that is entirely reliant on embodied expression. This moment of pure uninhibited expression encapsulates Helga’s powerful emotions, demonstrating her desire for freedom, wholeness—the actions and gestures of someone

who has felt perpetually trapped and sought mobility as the answer to the quicksand of life. Though it is unclear why she begins to dance, once she is involved, once she hears the music and feels the rhythm pulsing throughout the club, she is inundated by a desire to move, to dance.

Here, Helga surrenders to the music, dance, and experience. She is an active participant in the collective gathering of black bodies dancing together. The text mentions Helga's own oblivion, and it is easy to assume that the other beings dancing with her are not fully aware of their surroundings—it is a time of both individual and communal expression. There is evident safety in this jazz club as it is located within Harlem, a conglomerate of black culture and experience. Helga is an active participant, subsumed by the music and invigorated by the essence of bodily motion. Helga merely *acts*—she dances, she embodies the fullness of herself without contemplating or overthinking who she is, who she is meant to be, where she belongs. She simply *is* in this space. If Helga is forever trapped in metaphorical quicksand, it is this scene that resembles her floating, or in terms of escaping quicksand. This is the time where Helga is not overtaken by her fears and anxieties and relies on sensation alone. This moment challenges Tanner's sentiments about Helga's inability to inhabit her lived body. Helga's involvement in this dance experience, though brief, accentuates how the body is a tool for communication and experiential connection. The music and the communal act of dancing awakens Helga to a very raw, primal urge, one that has often been constrained and rejected by society's treatment towards women—especially women of color. As she surrenders to her dancing body, and as the music awakens something intrinsic inside of Helga, she performs her



own lived body while also embodying a collective of oppressed people who have gone before her.

Martha Graham suggested that bodily motion has the power to exhibit and express what words cannot do. For Graham and many of her contemporaries, the dancing body can articulate the ineffable and indescribable. Race, as it establishes identity, can add complexity to Graham's conceptualization of speaking bodies. How does a silenced, marginalized group of people find embodied expression when their bodies have been both violated and policed? What Helga's dance experience establishes is how this physical communication can provide her with the opportunity to corporeally speak freely. Even more, her experience highlights the importance of black spaces and how they offer safe gatherings for people of color to feel freedom in their bodies. It is the nexus between personal and collective here that is vital, and it suggests a richer way of considering how dancing while black is symbolic of a community and its cultural history. The term "blood memory" was used by both Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey, each offering unique interpretations. Susan Manning delineates on the usage of "blood memory" by both Graham and Ailey, writing, "Their comments underline both the distance and the parallel between the two practices. Whereas Graham's singular 'blood memory' referred to a generalized past shared by many peoples, Ailey's plural 'blood memory' referred to a historically specific past shared by African Americans" (180). As Helga engages in this embodied performance through dancing, she inhabits a body that is reflective of an archive that encapsulates the collective experience of African American culture and history. In *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the*

*Americas*, Diana Taylor states, “Cultural memory is, among other things, a practice, an act of imagination and interconnection...Memory is embodied and sensual, that is, conjured through the senses; it links the deeply private with social, even official, practices. Sometimes memory is difficult to evoke, yet it’s highly efficient; it’s always operating in conjunction with other memories...Memory, like heart, beats beyond our capacity to control it, a lifeline between past and future” (82). Taylor’s discussion of cultural memory is applicable to this scene as Helga’s embodied performance rests at the nexus of muscle memory and cultural memory. The muscle memory, the ease of familiarity in which Helga performs corporeally suggests a recognition of a larger cultural memory.

When the music stops Helga thinks that she has been engaging in something wrong, and this recognition of how she had completely surrendered to the music and the movement suggests her awareness of what her participation signaled. She made herself a part of the collective black experience, and with that, she had engaged in a cultural memory, allowing her body to connect with a form of movement intrinsic to her identity. And yet, that thought, the feelings it had awakened and manifested in and through her body, terrifies her:

And when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her. She hardened her determination to get away. She wasn’t, she told herself, a jungle creature. She cloaked herself in a faint disgust as she watched the entertainers throw themselves about to the bursts

of syncopated jangle, and when the time came again from the patrons to dance, she declined. (Larsen 54)

This scene concentrates on Helga's physical release and embodied performance, and the transitions between her beginning and ceasing to dance is steely and abrupt. Until the music stops, Helga is floating, not consumed by her loneliness or lack; she merely dances. Helga, having toed the line between black and white for so long, is not only constrained by society; she is also active in self-constraining herself, of holding herself back.

This momentary liberation from constraint, whether cultural or personal, is embedded throughout the dancing passage. As I suggested earlier, the text does not indicate why or how Helga decides to dance nor does it offer a clear segue into her leaving the dance floor. There are small cues, but the text does not delve into Helga's disconnection or disdain. Rather this passage of text illustrates Helga's constrained movements. She is led, prompted by her group, perhaps, to dance—and she enjoys it. The experience is exhilarating as she finds the essence of life: movement, connection, happiness. The moment the music stops, Helga returns to the present and disconnects; she panics. Once again, Helga locates joy within herself and she feels hope, but she immediately distances herself from that feeling and flees. In many ways, this repetitive pattern is a performance of self, a well-rehearsed, robotic motion that she has perfected: flee, happiness, disdain, flee. It is predictable and rote, the movements of someone constrained, but as Helga's dancing illustrates, she is capable of inhabiting herself fully and engaging in a part of herself that she has been taught to deny. Helga's momentary

enjoyment of dancing signals a larger connection to cultural memory and experience. Her response to the music and movement encapsulates a very innate relationship to African-American history. There lies the tension. Helga, accustomed to not belonging anywhere, cannot and should not feel such an immediate sense of belonging to the collaborative embodied expression. The narrative of *Quicksand*, as a semi-autobiographical representation of Nella Larsen's life, offers one consideration of dance as it relates to race and gender.

## CONCLUSION

I started this project in a pre-COVID world—in a time where many gave little thought to bodies congregating together in a space. At that time, I was making plans to attend a live performance of *19 Poses* before life as the world knew it paused in March 2020. We avoided human interaction, keeping our distance, maneuvering around each other in masks. Before COVID, one gave little thought to the bustle of grocery carts, reaching in front of and around others to acquire necessities. Suddenly, we were ushered into a new way of living, and we were supposed to follow the arrows in the proper direction, to maintain six feet of distance. Though the political divide associated with the pandemic is a beast of its own, it is impossible to deny the significance of being a human being with an immortal body. COVID forced many of us to face sickness, suffering, isolation, disconnection, and loss. For those who escaped unscathed, perhaps they will never understand collective human suffering, but for those who were immersed in it, up close as an essential worker or while watching from afar, humans were forced to reconcile what it means to have a frail body. Frail in the sense that our bodies can contract illness and die; we are resilient creatures, but we have our limitations.

Initially, while I was piecing my thoughts together about dance and expressive movement and fearful about the pandemic, I contemplated Martha Graham's words: "You do not realize how the headlines that make daily history affect the muscles of the human body." Collectively, the entire world was faced with a life-altering disease that threatened our health. The injustices of a broken system permeated every facet of the pandemic, reminding those who were willing to listen and pay attention just how

demoralizing and disheartening our world is. While many were terrified of the disease, others fretted over minor inconveniences. The embodied performance of each human being varied across the spectrum. For those who were conscientious, their dance involved obeying mask regulations and following the arrows pertaining to social distancing. For those who dreamed of a pre-COVID world, their protestations were a synchronized performance of push-ups outside of closed gyms.

Writing this project, a feat in and of itself, has also forced me to wrestle with how bodies communicate singularly, revealing themselves and their truths, as well as how bodies communicate communally, sharing space, anticipating others' movements and gestures. I have considered how cultural trauma, the weight of devastation and human suffering, presses upon our bodies, the vessels in which we navigate the world.

In May 2020, the death of George Floyd ignited racial protests across the country, illuminating necessary conversations surrounding racial injustice that had been long overdue. While attending a Black Lives Matter protest in Knoxville, I was reminded of the suffragettes marching through Washington, DC, eager to obtain the right to vote. Those women enacted in a performance of self as they wore uniforms specific to their fields, or to the work they dreamed of doing. As protests were happening around the nation, I stood in downtown Knoxville as an ally, but primarily a bystander, watching human beings of all races, the majority in masks, demanding justice. It is terrifying to realize how history is constantly repeating itself and how little we as humans progress when it comes to hatred, prejudice, and ignorance. But as I wrestled with my own anxieties surrounding such massive upheaval, my mind shifted to a different Graham

quote: “The body is a sacred garment. It's your first and last garment; it is what you enter life in and what you depart life with, and it should be treated with honor.” At the end of this project, it is this sentiment that resonates. Considering the immense devastation of disease, injustice, and war over the past two years, it is difficult not to consider what it means to honor ourselves and each other—a concept that humanity collectively struggles with.

The origins of this project began with my interest in *19 Poses*, and I set out to consider the links between expressive movement, modernist literature, and gender identity. In my introduction to this project, I recognized the limited connections between modern dance and modernism, but I also embraced how the concept of embodied performance can generate various forms of expressive movement and dance styles. I contended that the kinesthetic language of the female-led modern dance movement revitalizes how modernist literature was read. In Chapter One, I delineated the history of modern dance, elucidating further on the connection points between the language of dance and embodiment. Chapters Two, Three, and Four uniquely explored the kinetic backdrop in which modernist literature responded to, contemplating how women, both white and black, experienced constraint and freedom. While the women included in this project, both real and fictional, wrestled with what it meant to exist in a body that often denied them agency, many of these women learned how to honor their bodies through embodied performance.

Even more, the women in this project who learned how to honor their bodies also conveyed how to speak through their bodies. The body, a locus of interactions and

reactions, allows dance to function as a kinetic archive, a space where language and meaning and communication are all bound together. Dance, a form of embodied performance and expressive movement, can transmit what words cannot. As Graham suggests, our bodies are what we enter and leave the world with. Learning how to honor these bodies and all that they are able to do—and not do—is a sacred act. What I wanted this project to showcase is how dance has the capacity to exist as an art form, means of communication, and performative act. It has the power to inspire, create, and subvert, and it is through this frail, immortal flesh that those who have experienced constraint can also find freedom through expressive movement, a language for those who have been silenced.



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## VITA

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