

**A CONTINUITY OF CHOREOGRAPHY:
HOW SIX AMERICAN WOMEN CHOREOGRAPHERS WORKING IN THE
EARLY 20TH AND EARLY 21ST CENTURIES NEGOTIATED
POLITICS, FUNDING, AND COMMUNITIES**

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Introduction

The social and political environment of the early 20th century in the United States marked a significant time for women to emerge as active participants in society, influencing the cultural shifts necessary for women choreographers to make a significant impact as leaders (Tomko 1999, x). By the early 21st century, the expanding field of dance included a surge of participatory, collaborative, socially engaged artistic practice. For example, choreographers embraced the viewer's experience in innovative ways, inviting collective, process-based, experiential work that blurs the lines of ownership and performance (Bishop 2012, 2-3). The ways women choreographers negotiated their artistic practices within the social and political terrains of these two eras offer an interesting historical continuity and shape new interpretations of dance history.

This paper argues that although the early 20th and early 21st centuries in the United States represented times of great political challenge and inequality, women choreographers innovatively expanded the purposes and possibilities of American modern dance by incorporating a continuity of similar ideas concerning social and

political engagement in their artistic practices in response to the needs of their communities and the shifting requirements of funding and producing organizations.

To consider this argument, this paper will examine how American history is construed through the social, political, and aesthetic values of six women choreographers - three working in the early 20th century (Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and Jane Dudley) and three working in the early 21st century (Liz Lerman, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, and Pat Graney). In this paper, these choreographers' artistic practices will be analyzed within the historical and cultural contexts of the early 20th and early 21st centuries.

Positioning Women and Dance in Early 20th Century American Social and Political Landscapes

Americans in the early 20th century experienced a tumultuous social and political era of adversity and possibility. Linda J. Tomko's (1999) text, *Dancing Class: Gender, Ethnicity, Social Divides in American Dance, 1890-1920*, highlights the abundant social, political, and cultural Progressive era developments that prompted changes in the way people related to each other and constructed identities for themselves. According to Tomko, industrialization, through an immigration influx in large cities and the resulting shift in hierarchies of class, race, and gender, instituted new opportunities and challenges for American citizens. A surge of immigration led to a bloated work force, resulting in discriminatory hiring practices. Inequalities began to crystalize in the lives of American citizens and, as the Great Depression took hold, a revolutionary movement emerged.

The devastation of the 1929 stock market crash and the Great Depression fostered an overall sense of deprivation, mistrust for the U.S. government, rebellion

against the ruling system, and radical promotion of new ideas (Prickett 1990, 52). Poverty and poor social conditions created discontent among the working class. A rebellious proletarian culture was bolstered by promises that an American Communist Party ideology would institute a platform of social justice and economic power (Korff 2001, 18). Many artists then turned to Marxism as a means of encouraging societal change. Protests aimed at the proletarian masses commonly included dance performance, with the dances expressing literal messages of revolt and calls to action (Graff 2001, 6).

This depression-era upheaval resulted in new ways for connecting bodily movements with political ideologies and nationalist identities, which then had major implications for modern dance (Franko 1997, 475). These movement ideologies concerned the rights of workers' and women's bodies, the collective power in demonstration, and dance's ability to communicate social issues and create change. Dance studies theorist Mark Franko posits modern dance (or "new" dance) as the main vehicle for moving these 1930s leftist ideologies (Franko 2002, 16). Since this new dance differed from commercial forms like chorus dance, a fracture divided the landscape of dance into three distinct genres: modern dance (subdivided into "high" modernist dance and radical new dance), chorus dance, and ballet. Interestingly, according to Franko, "the apparently aesthetic conflict between proponents of modern dance and chorus dance took on partisan overtones. To put it bluntly, modern dance seemed aligned with communism and chorus dance with capitalism" (Franko 2002, 17).

Some choreographers of this era, however, in order to distance themselves from any assumed connections to communism, held tightly to the modernist principles of

concert dance made popular in the early 1900s. Dance studies writer Helen Thomas adds, “realism and modernism were polarized during that era. The conviction grew among artists that . . . American art should adopt its own specific subject matter and its own form of expression” (Thomas 1995, 126). Thus, not only did modern dance become polarized, artists tended to identify as either radical realists or bourgeois modernists, with each representing American ideals in differing ways. The radical realists found a space of representation within the political climate surrounding the 1930’s depression.

In 1935, under the umbrella of his New Deal policies, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Works Progress Administration, the U.S. government’s unprecedented effort to support job creation during the depression with federal funding; the arts were included in this set of policies. Dancers were initially hired under the Federal Theatre Project branch of the initiative. Eventually, the Federal Dance Project (FDP) was established for dance artists. However, the FDP survived only a year due to disorganization, exclusionary hiring practices, and resultant protest and threats of unionization (Thomas 1995, 124). These issues only seemed to deepen the rift between commercially successful chorus dance (representing bourgeois capitalism) and radical, leftist new dance (representing unionized and often communist supported labor). With the bourgeois claiming the higher strata of the social hierarchy, due to most members of this group coming from American families playing major roles in the emerging industries of the time, bourgeois chorus dance became perceived as *high* art, while the new dance was labeled as *low* art (Franko 2002, 119).

The complex issues instigated by the Great Depression made the 1930s an especially active period for the formation of dance groups whose aims were specifically

to respond to social and political discontent created by these imposed hierarchies in society. These dance groups, often organized and led by women, offered visual representations of accessible, participatory radicalism through various forms of demonstrations. The New Dance Group is one of the most documented of these organizations. Formed in 1932 under the umbrella organization Workers Dance League, the NDG's slogan was "The Dance is a Weapon in the Revolutionary Class Struggle." Dance studies writer Ellen Graff describes its mission as threefold: "the identification of artists with workers and the working class; the emphasis on egalitarian and collaborative approaches to dance making; [and] the themes of social justice which emerged from the work itself" (Graff 2001, 3). In addition to spotlighting class struggles, the NDG members responded in their choreography to prevailing issues of race and gender (Graff 2002, 13). Further, they broke down the traditional rehearsal hierarchy between the authoritative choreographer and the passive dancer by instituting a collective choreographic process. They also encouraged inclusivity by welcoming anyone showing interest in dance, regardless of previous training or ability (Graff 2001, 9). Finally, every technique class offered in the NDG school included one hour of Marxist theory discussion (Korff 2002, 22). New 1930s dance groups, therefore, clearly self-identified as participants in the larger social and political dialogues of the time in which social hierarchies and inequalities between individuals were questioned.

Women's contested identities played a fundamental part in 1930s American societal upheaval. Women struggled to maintain the momentum gained with the passing of the 19th Amendment, and the feminist fervor thereafter in the "Roaring 20s" (Moran 1989, 2). True equality of the sexes was not yet a fact, but the number of women in the

work force during the Depression era rose by 50%. However, women were not accepted in certain fields and positions, they were not paid equally to men, and they were blocked from organizing in unions (Moran 1989, 1-6).

Within this faltering women's movement during the 1930's, women in dance were particularly instrumental in providing leadership and innovation needed by an American society trying to recover from the Great Depression. Women navigated political terrain in pioneering ways to establish themselves as professional choreographers. For example, by promoting national pride and the beauty of America in their work, some choreographers were federally funded to tour internationally as ambassadors of American culture. Also, women infused racial and cultural issues in choreography, encouraging inclusivity in the presentation of diverse bodies onstage. Lastly, women established and led several influential leftist dance groups. The following three portraits of impactful female choreographers (Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and Jane Dudley) will offer a survey of evidence illustrating women's initiative and power during the early 20th century.

Portraits of Early 20th Century Women Choreographers

While many women contributed significantly to dance in the early 20th century, the three choreographers highlighted below offer a range of choreographic pursuits, prestige, and social and political influence. Further, they all oscillated between the identities of radicalism and bourgeois conservatism discussed in the first section of this paper in order to develop an individual dance practice. Their bodies of work and responses to them then and now offer insights into the ways women shaped dance history, forging new paths for women to traverse in the future.

Isadora Duncan

Dance studies scholar Ann Daly describes Isadora Duncan's life as a series of contradictions and juxtapositions in the (1995) text *Done Into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America*. For example, Duncan is well known today for her contributions to American modern dance, although much of her career was spent in Europe. She claimed to have empathy for the poverty-stricken masses, yet maintained a close connection to the wealthy New York elite for patronage (184). While some labeled her as a traitor for her assumed loyalties to Russia, she also created several works inspired by American nationalism (194). Some evidence suggests Duncan believed in equality of the sexes, while other evidence suggests she was more conventional in her views of women's roles (162). She politicized the female dancing body onstage by skirting the boundary between what was considered sexually taboo and visually pleasing. She made these aesthetic juxtapositions possible by challenging the constraints of the corseted dancer and donning free-flowing tunic costumes that defied the conservative dictates of puritanism (109). Isadora Duncan exemplifies how some influential women created complex paths while weaving through the values of society and their desire to disrupt those values during the Progressive era.

Duncan presented the dancing body with deliberate, subversive intentions in regard to female sexuality. Daly describes Duncan's desire to present her body naturally, to exude human presence and detached classicism: "She wanted to create a female dancing body in which sexuality circulated freely as a part of the *human* condition, without being objectified as a producer and product of specifically male

desire” (Daly 1995, 170). Daly speculates that by today’s feminist standards, Duncan’s adherence to natural movement could be seen as propagating the dichotomies of nature/culture, body/mind, and woman/man. However, at the turn of the 20th century, this return to nature was seen as romanticizing the dancing body, aligning Duncan with the liberated female nude, so highly regarded by her patrons in painting (Tomko 1999, 62). Her costumes were bare, yet she appeared sculptural, her movement communicating chaste—not showy or seductive—expression.

Duncan was critically and publicly lauded worldwide through most of her career. She found support in elite New York women who sponsored house concerts to showcase her solo dance works. These audiences were receptive to her free, natural movement quality and her desexualized, classical presence. Interestingly, Daly notes these partnerships created spaces for the public and private domains to come together within the confines of professional performance, allowing female leadership to take hold within both domains. In this partnership, Duncan *and* her wealthy hosts became arts innovators. Whereas some critics branded Duncan an elitist at a time when many dance artists were concerned with working-class issues, “the force of elite women’s interest secured for Duncan *as a dancer* performance platforms, receptive audiences, and a level of media visibility she was unable to mobilize in commercial theatre circles” (Tomko 1999, 63).

Despite her success in America, Duncan suffered eventual professional demise as a direct result of time she spent in Russia in 1922. She had previously recast herself as a symbol of American nationalism, performing solos set to patriotic music, adorning the American flag as costume (Daly 1995, 194). At first, publicly praised, once she

returned to the U.S. after 10 months in Russia, establishing a school there and marrying a Russian man, she was abruptly deemed a traitor, and criticized for her “disloyalty” by the American public. As Daly articulates it, “The former Lady Liberty, maternal and majestic, had transgressed a geographic/sexual/ideological border, and was thus branded a communist whore” (Daly 1995, 203). A defeated Duncan left the U.S. for good in 1923. Although Duncan suffered professionally at the end of her American career, she left an enduring mark on modern dance history by subversively rebelling against repressive structures imposed upon women’s bodies through aesthetic innovations in performance and choreography.

Martha Graham

Martha Graham, one of the pioneers of American modern dance, is often aligned with Stravinsky, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Picasso – other “geniuses” (Jowitt 2015, 1). Her signature aesthetic, technical training system, and choreographic masterpieces have influenced later generations of dance makers such as José Limón and Paul Taylor; Graham’s influence seems limitless. Graham’s social and political affiliations were controversial, reflecting great ambition, deep respect for her art, and passion for humanity and peace. Founded in 1926, the Martha Graham Dance Company continues to restage Graham’s timeless, relevant repertoire today.

Graham’s interest in the performing body draws from the inner psyche - how feelings translate to physicality (Foster 1986, 25). This physicality demands a highly skilled, trained body for proper execution. Dance studies scholar Susan Leigh Foster describes Graham’s fundamental principles: “the contraction and release, the spiral, the primacy of the central body in initiating movement, and the sequential growth of

movement from the center of the body to the periphery” (Foster 1986, 28). The bodies Graham staged tended to be traditionally ideal in shape and size, although she also featured a racially diverse company of dancers. Credited in a 2005 PBS article titled “Martha Graham: About the Dancer” Graham was touted as the “first choreographer to regularly employ Asian and African-American dancers;” her use of *other* bodies ruptured racial norms of the time period, adding dimension to her seemingly non-egalitarian principles.

Graham often placed emphasis on the female experience, women appearing as the central, archetypal figures in her dances. According to dance historian Susan Manning, Graham’s “choreography dramatized the conflict between female dependence and independence, placing female subjectivity centerstage” (Manning 2004, 182). Dance critic Deborah Jowitt concurs, adding, “In developing her dances, Graham also developed a training system to make her women dancers stand for humanity” (Jowitt 2012, 2). Dance studies theorist Ramsay Burt narrows in on perceptions of Jacosta, the central character in *Night Journey*, by placing the character in relation to societal norms of the time to redefine the term “strong woman.” He says, “*Night Journey* subversively reappropriates a canonical text in order to interrogate the psychological construction of feminine subjectivity through the discourse of psychoanalytic theory” (Burt 1998, 50). In other words, when the work is analyzed through a psycholanalytic lens, the true strength of woman emerges, a quietly powerful method of choreographing gendered strength.

Graham’s choreography is often described as emotional and universal because of its presentation of the body as an instrument of inner turmoil and feeling (Franko

2002, 67). Author Susan Leigh Foster states, “Graham carefully chooses the themes for her dances, evaluating their personal relevance but also their universal significance,” indicating an interest in making her work accessible to all (Foster 1986, 27). Graham’s accessibility is illustrated through minimal abstraction of universal themes. Further, when she participated politically, she responded to issues she felt applied universally, and she aimed for women onstage to represent all of humanity (Graff 1997, 121; Jowitt 2012, 2).

Martha Graham’s powerful choreographic aesthetic invigorated her more guarded public political posture. While many of her contemporaries used dance to communicate left-wing, even communist values, Graham “claimed herself as fiercely apolitical, a non-joiner” (Geduld 2008, 43). However, even though Graham’s political participation was indeed cautious and decided, she delivered political messages in her work when she felt they affected *all* people, not just one group of people. For example, the *Dance Observer* noted that although her work *Immediate Tragedy* was made in response to the Spanish Civil War, Graham felt it applied universally to tragedy and devastation (Graff 1997, 121). She created a platform for her work to be considered relevant to a broad audience incorporating all social strata.

Graham’s choreography was also used as a tool for enhancing 20th century international relations. The U.S. government adopted her work for a midcentury international cultural diplomacy touring project, deeming her work an American brand (Graff 1997, 131). Dance historian Victoria Phillips Geduld describes the American government’s tactic for assuaging tense relations between the U.S. and Asian countries post-Cold War using Graham’s cogent choreography: “Owing to her powerful

expression of a distinct American and cutting-edge approach to high-art dance, the United States government apparatus recognized her as a valuable asset for cultural export” (Geduld 2010, 71). Serving as a cultural ambassador of the U.S., Graham illustrated the power of individual potential in realizing the American dream.

This was not the first time the U.S. had exported Graham’s choreography as representative of its nationalism. Her 1937 performance of *Frontier* at the White House stimulated a long-standing governmental interest in her work (Graff 1997, 121). Graham committed herself to a thematic viewpoint that symbolized an expansive, free American landscape and lifestyle in works such as *Frontier* and others (Graff 1997, 124). According to Graham, it was important to “know the land” in order to know and create American dance (Geduld 2010, 55). Further, unlike members of leftist organizations whose work centered on protest, Graham was publicly evasive on issues relating to Russia and the Communist Party, making her the perfect politically correct candidate for representing American culture and pride at home and abroad.

Jane Dudley

Jane Dudley, choreographer, performer, teacher, and activist, is known for dances inspired by her left-wing political ideology; her contributions radicalized a new form of dance within the New Dance Group in the 1930s and 1940s. Her belief that dance could be used as a tool for revolutionary change inspired her egalitarian teaching methods and choreographic process (Korff 2002, 22). She combined aesthetic and political elements to reach the masses in seminal works like *Harmonica Breakdown* and *Time is Money* with scholars like Susan Manning, Mark Franko, and others speculating about the many levels of political meaning in these works.

Dudley's use of the body onstage centered on what Mark Franko calls "emotional Marxism" (Franko 2002, 71). To react to capitalism and the worker's struggle, Dudley incorporated heavy, effortful movements, literal gestures of work, and rebellious presence onstage. These choreographic strategies were intended to evoke emotion in the viewer, creating space for social change (Franko 2002, 71). One example of these strategies in use occurs in *Time is Money* when a solo dancer moves to a tempo not heard in the accompanying music, as if an invincible outside force (government, work force, etc.) is acting upon this passive body. Later, the performer seems to awaken to confront the audience with a defiant gaze and stance, as if suddenly recognizing (but choosing not to accept) injustice and cruelty (Franko 1997, 484). Images of the working body, the exhausted body, the strong body, and the defiant body recurred to show human oppression and revolt. Although these human conditions could be considered universal, similar to the aesthetic promoted by Martha Graham, Dudley clearly placed her dancer through costuming and imagery within a realistic and specific social class, a class struggling for human rights in the bourgeois notion of the American dream.

Like her New Dance Group colleagues, Jane Dudley sought to institute a collaborative, egalitarian dance education for the masses, including both theory and practice (Thomas 1995, 122). According to several sources, the purpose of dance classes at the NDG was twofold: to prepare dancers for protest outside the studio, and to create a sense of community (Graff, 1997; Korff, 2002; Prickett, 1990). To facilitate these purposes, Dudley and her NDG cohort structured classes to include improvisation, dance techniques, and political (Marxist) conversations or lectures. Often, classes comprised pedestrian movement, the structure of which could be directed or

manipulated by anyone in the class. Dudley also staged mock protests during classes, of which she said, “the dancer learns to move communally, to express with others a simple class conscious idea . . . Through the discussion of a theme and the problems of movement brought forward by the leader and dancers, clarity of ideology can be given” (Graff 1997, 42).

Dudley has been criticized for ignoring (or else, not recognizing) the racial implications of her choreography. In the (2004) text *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*, author Susan Manning defines a phenomenon known as “metaphorical minstrelsy,” which refers to the unfair representation of African American experiences by white dancing bodies, in this case, Jane Dudley’s. Metaphorical minstrelsy effectively silences black voices and promotes white perspectives of the black experience.¹ Dudley’s signature work, *Harmonica Breakdown*, demonstrates Manning’s concept of metaphorical minstrelsy by superimposing the black, working-class identity on a white, female body. This representation is flawed, according to Manning.

These issues were further complicated by the fact that at the time, leftist organizations offered more patronage to Negro dancers than modern dance organizations did. “The leftist dance network provided not only production opportunities, but also platforms for advocacy” (Manning 2004, 59). The negative effects of faulty representation in choreography caused the relationship between black dancers and white, leftist dancers to be complicated, though in some sense, mutually beneficial.

Mark Franko offers a counter argument to Manning’s analysis of *Harmonica Breakdown*, pointing to Dudley’s own words about her artistic intentions for the solo: “I

¹ See “Danced Spirituals,” the first chapter of Susan Manning’s (2004) text *Modern Dance, Negro Dance* for a helpful, more detailed discussion of the concept of metaphorical minstrelsy.

was in defiance of the white man, even though I am white” (Franko 2002, 101). Franko contends: “What we have here is a psychological exploration of cultural cross-dressing signaled by the shadow of gender instability . . . class could be understood as a montage or composite representation of ethnic and sexual identities” (Franko 2002, 102). While Franko suggests a relation to the operations of minstrelsy, he also cites the work as a location for multiple identities to coalesce. Dudley’s choreography, similar to that of other NDG members, is complicated, and remains a site of much discussion.

For these and other women choreographing in the early 20th century, to make dance in America at this time was to engage politically and socially. Issues of class, race, and gender converged in choreography to communicate and attempt to create change in society. Political activation also became a tool for gaining artistic renown and financial support. Analyzing these strategies and ways of engaging suggests an interesting connection to the ways American women choreographers worked a century later, wrestling in innovative, yet similar ways within the early 21st century landscape of culture and funding. While the political and social climates of these two eras are quite distinct, offering unique challenges and opportunities to women choreographers, these women interestingly made artistic and career choices for similar reasons and with similar goals in mind. In the following, three early 21st century women choreographers will be profiled to highlight these similarities, and to point out the main distinction between these two groups of women – the differing ways they approach dance’s use in and for communities.

Positioning Women & Dance in Early 21st Century American Social & Political Landscapes

Conversations in the early 21st century among working artists, funding organizations, and scholars reflected dynamic changes in America's social and political landscape. Generally, issues of gender and racial inequality, attention to diversity, and desire for community-based work dominated much of this discussion. Choreographers, like all artists, reflected the changing dynamic of American society in their work.

The status of American politics at the turn of the millennium creates a complex picture of how the arts fit into the overall culture. According to social scientist Toby Miller, in a 2000 *American Behavior Scientist* article, four major national issues contributed greatly to issues in arts funding during the 1990s: "party politics, constitutional law and lore, the function of art, and debates about sex and race" (Miller 2000, 1432). All of these issues, according to Miller, stemmed from a public debate about what constituted "Americanness." The late 1900s marked an especially challenging time for arts funding; conservative politicians cut funding dramatically, resulting in great struggles for arts professionals and a nationwide reassessment of the place and value of art. The onus for arts patronage began to fall more heavily on private donors and patrons, and the arts became more marginalized in society, resultantly (Miller 2000, 1435).

A narrower scope of analysis of dance in the late 20th century indicates a theoretical boom as scholars, dance makers, and educators expanded the boundaries of dance discourse to include new identity politics, questions of representation, aesthetics, embodiment, and pedagogical concerns (Thomas 2003, 1-5). Feminist studies and cultural theory, in particular, greatly impacted dance artists of this time

period because of the many national debates happening about gender and race (Albright 1997, 5). Further, university dance programs developed nationwide and several national dance organizations were established to help support the field. All of these developments equated to a growing dance field, ripe for continued development. However, a range of political issues and funding problems presented the field with major challenges.

Scholars like dance studies writer Jan Van Dyke emphasize that “access to funding is critical for both visibility and attracting future funds. Since professional awards and opportunities tend to go to those whose work is known, grants have taken on major significance” (Van Dyke 1996, 536). The National Endowment for the Arts, a major funding source for these and other artists around the turn of the 21st century, evolved in its published values and goals, as indicated in the organization’s Annual Reports. A summary of reports from the 1980s indicates support for individual artists and professional companies to tour nationally. Due to a 39% federal budget cut in 1996, the NEA stopped funding individuals, and grants required matching contributions. Further, the NEA shifted away from discipline-based grants (dance, theatre, etc.) to area-based grants (heritage, education, etc.), creating greater demand for diversity and interdisciplinary collaborations. This restructuring drastically changed the landscape of funding, the purposes of dance in society, and the way dance was presented in it.

In the 1990s, community-based art began to shift from the periphery of society to a more central place (Bishop 2012, 2). A philosophical desire to overturn the traditional relationship between spectator and performer led to greater interest in repositioning the viewer as a participant—even co-creator—of artistic works. According to author Claire

Bishop, this shift reflected a Marxist “aim to place pressure on conventional modes of artistic production and consumption under capitalism” (Bishop 2012, 2). Further, the political and cultural changes previously mentioned demanded the arts evolve by, among other things, embracing cultural diversity and developing stronger ties with every area in the community.² The NEA and other funding organizations were pressured to incorporate more community engagement initiatives in funding opportunities during this time period. Once funding for individuals disappeared, organizations found greater success, particularly when aligning with educational institutions and underserved communities (NEA, 1997). The 1998 ArtsREACH program, for example, funded community partnerships between arts and non-arts organizations. The 1999 Challenge America initiative “targeted support to arts education, services for young people, cultural heritage, community partnerships and expanded access to the arts” (NEA 1999). Additional new areas of emergence at the NEA during the late 20th century included leadership initiatives and folk arts.

Underlying the social and political implications of dance and its place in society during this dynamic time was a climate of inequality that disadvantaged women in funding and employment opportunities. Scholar Jan Van Dyke asserts that the construct of gender in America positioned women and their work as less important, and although they comprised the majority of participants in the field, they were less funded, less often recognized, and less likely to achieve leadership roles and employment. She says, “The strong numerical presence of women in the field clearly has not been sufficient to ensure that women maintain even equal representation in professional leadership” (Van

² For a helpful discussion about specific changes arts organizations were encouraged to implement in the late 20th century, see the (1994) article “The Arts Look Ahead” by Alvin H. Reiss.

Dyke 1996, 542). One telling set of statistics she cites is a 1993 NEA study on U.S. choreographers that reported “for men, average income from choreography including grants was twice that for women” (Van Dyke 1996, 541). Another example is the conspicuous composition of faculty employed at the 1993 American Dance Festival School: the faculty comprised 25 men and 14 women (64% male); the student population, meanwhile, included 58 men and 219 women (79% female). These organizations, and many others, according to Van Dyke, stood in stark contradiction to their stated organizational values of equality and diversity, placing unfair disadvantages onto women and minorities.

Portraits of Early 21st Century Women Choreographers

The following portraits of three prominent women choreographers working in the early 21st century offer evidence of dance’s shifting place in society as related to community and the changing demands of choreographers in producing their work and maintaining artistic standards. As with the choreographers profiled above, these choreographers highlighted below represent a range of contribution to the dance field, demonstrating various levels of success, artistic pursuits, and influences. Their artistic practices and strategies of locating support for their work provide insights into the ways women have negotiated the changing landscape of society and the arts.

Liz Lerman

Liz Lerman, acclaimed choreographer, performer, writer, and educator, founded Maryland-based Liz Lerman Dance Exchange in 1976. Its mission is to create dances that arise from asking questions like: Who gets to dance? Why does it matter? It prides itself on being an intergenerational company committed to “creative research”

conducted in various environments with and for various communities (Dance Exchange 2015). Dance Exchange also conducts community-based dance training, community residencies, interactive performances, and traditional concerts (Dance Exchange 2015). With Dance Exchange, Lerman toured internationally, and was well funded and awarded. She stepped down as Artistic Director in 2011 due to “the financial pressure of sustaining her company [which] limited the kind of work she could do” (Kaufman 2011, 1) and has since taken on several independent community-based, site-specific projects.

Lerman’s site-specific, participatory works seek to redefine spaces and educate dancers and non-dancers alike through various choreographic and presentational strategies. According to Lerman, site-specific dance has the capacity to transform spaces, “making it possible for people to undergo a fresh understanding of their surroundings, of an idea, or of their own relationship to artistic experience” (Lerman 2011, 121). Thus, she has created works for such varied places as the Lincoln Memorial, a New Hampshire shipyard, senior centers, and various other sites. She asserts when working with non-dancers, the choreographer’s responsibility is to educate them about choreography while they are in the process of doing it (Lerman 2011, 133). Lerman laments that “abstraction is now the only expression permissible,” which, for her, is a negative trend that avoids making dance legible, so she relies on spoken word, pedestrian movement, and literal gesture, in addition to more stylized postmodern movement (Lerman 2011, 93).

In addition to her prolific work creating projects in and with communities through Dance Exchange, Lerman published three texts about her work: *Hiking the Horizontal* (2011) contextualizes the scope of her work through personal anecdotes and stories;

Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process (2003) offers a method of peer review and discussion that is meant to be applied to anything created; *Teaching Dance to Senior Adults* (1984) engages the elderly population with modern dance expression.

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar

Jowale Willa Jo Zollar's vision is to reimagine society and identities by challenging racial and gendered ideologies of inequality through dance performance (George-Graves 2010, 6). To accomplish a sense of solidarity, and hopefully, raise social consciousness, she founded New York-based Urban Bush Women in 1984. The company adopted a mission "to bring the untold and under-told histories and stories of disenfranchised people to light through dance. We do this from a woman-centered perspective and as members of the African Diaspora community in order to create a more equitable balance of power in the dance world and beyond" (UBW 2014). UBW adopted six core values that shape its artistic processes and explain its community agenda.³ According to dance and gender studies writer Nadine George-Graves, UBW's works highlight injustice and cruelty, yet emphasize ultimate overcoming and empowerment. George-Graves stresses, "These pieces call attention to the global tyrannies over women and provide strategies for understanding and conquering them with the ultimate goal of moving toward healing" (George-Graves 2010, 134). The company, under Zollar's leadership, has found international success, receiving the highest awards and grants, and performing contemporary concert works framed by the culture and traditions of the African Diaspora.

One of UBW's most significant achievements is its extraordinary record of and

³ For a full list of UBW core values: https://www.urbanbushwomen.org/about_ubw/mission_values

continued commitment to community programs. Community is important to Zollar because it implies belonging, confidence, and sense of purpose. To help create and maintain communities, Zollar and UBW conduct 12 types of dance-based classes or workshops that seek to support community values, history, and identity.⁴ Intended for children and adults of all ages and backgrounds, “the emphasis on learning is vital” in these classes and workshops (George-Graves 2010, 171). Additionally, UBW instituted an annual 10-day “Summer Leadership Institute,” which Zollar describes as a “learning experience that leverages the arts as a vehicle for social activism and civic engagement” (UBW 2014).

Pat Graney

The Pat Graney Company is a Seattle-based contemporary dance organization that “creates, performs and tours new dance/installation works and conducts arts-based educational programming for incarcerated women” (Pat Graney 2015). While the company’s founding date is unclear, Graney herself has been creating interdisciplinary, installation, and site-specific work since 1981.

For the past 20 years, Graney and her company have conducted Keeping the Faith –The Prison Project, an “arts-based educational residency program designed to enable incarcerated women and girls to discover a sense of identity and to develop that identity within the context of community—through the vehicles of performance, video documentation and a published anthology of their writings” (Pat Graney 2015). The project offers incarcerated people a chance to explore and affirm their identities by

⁴ For a comprehensive listing of classes and workshops, see the UBW website: https://www.urbanbushwomen.org/create_dance/classes_and_workshops

telling their stories and collaborating creatively. According to author Jessica Berson in a 2008 article in *The Drama Review*,

Graney locates potential for personal empowerment in the project's auto-biographical creative processes and its demands for constructive social interaction. The collaborative work of creating a performance piece grants inmates permission to speak and be heard, to touch each other, and to play, all of which can contribute to emotional growth. (Berson 2008, 91)

In addition to the successful Keeping the Faith program, Graney seems invested in her home community of Seattle, evidenced by an active social media presence that advocates a communal support for women and dance.⁵ Additionally, her choreography and community work has been sponsored locally and nationally. She has won many national awards including a Doris Duke Performing Artist Award in 2013 and an Artist Innovator Award in 2011 (Pat Graney 2015).

Institutional Contexts and Support Structures

Institutional contexts communicate much about how women choreographers in the early 20th and early 21st centuries participated in society in relation to other (aesthetic and process) concerns. Further, their differing relationships and sources of support illustrate a complex picture of negotiation between funding, community, and artistic needs.

Women Choreographers in the Early 20th Century

Some early 20th century choreographers, impassioned by a unique social and political climate, used dance as a tool for political participation - even activism. For example, Jane Dudley's connections to the New Dance Group led her to make dances that illustrated the plight of the worker in the early 1900s. Further, her left-wing ideology inspired communal, egalitarian teaching and artistic processes. Martha Graham, by

⁵ See Pat Graney Company's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/PatGraneyCompany?ref=ts>

contrast, participated politically, but in a subtler way. Graham's approach widened out in scope to include an interest in international politics. Isadora Duncan's choreography, while certainly political, was aimed squarely at addressing social issues; she challenged dominant discourses of women's bodies and their place in society at the time.

Women choreographers at this time also relied upon innovative sources of funding and producing support of their work, often calling on interpersonal relationships, shared ideologies, and adherence to mandated standards of art to fulfill artistic goals. Whereas Martha Graham maintained allegiance to America, designing her work to fit a nationalistic sense of pride, Jane Dudley challenged government decisions revolving around capitalism and workers' rights. Resultantly, Graham received funding from the U.S. government and Dudley relied on grassroots organizational support from the NDG. Duncan, on the other hand, built interpersonal relationships with wealthy patrons, a strategy that effectively funded her work.

Women Choreographers in the Early 21st Century

The broad requirements of funding organizations and needs of localized communities placed unique social and political demands on choreographers working in the early 21st century. For these reasons, women choreographers at this time began to call on innovative methods of dance making that included mobilization and adaptation of dance to specific communities.

Some artists during this time transported their arts initiatives to target participants. Pat Graney, for example, holds her Keeping the Faith program in prisons, since incarcerated women are confined there. Graney's work helps incarcerated people visualize their confinement as an opportunity for community building and identity

exploration (Pat Graney 2015). Liz Lerman creates work with community members, addressing the needs and interests of each particular community. Partnerships with communities are still created by many dance companies grappling with how best to serve potential audience members, how to be funded, and how to meet artistic goals.

Some of these artists use certain places in their work for relevant political reasons. For example, Zollar and Urban Bush Women relocated the 2015 Summer Leadership Institute to New Orleans because after Hurricane Katrina, the city expressed a need for collaborative approaches to rebuild its tradition of vibrant arts and culture. Since New Orleans struggled with racial injustices during the aftermath of Katrina, UBW's mission for racial equity makes this partnership particularly effective (UBW 2015). The social and cultural goals of the community in need and the mission of the project and company align in this initiative.

Contexts, Connections, Comparisons

Women choreographers working in the early 21st century confronted inequalities and challenges similar to those of their early 20th century predecessors. These choreographers still grappled with standards of “fund-worthy” art driven by the U.S. government (NEA), they further teased out the sociopolitical relationship of performance (performer) to community (spectator), and relied on partnerships and inventive support structures to produce their work. However, changes in American culture and politics demanded that artists rely on some different structures of support for funding and producing in order to meet the needs of their companies, the communities they served, and their funding sources.

The main *difference* between these two groups of artists is in the differing ways dance is used in and for communities. Changing demands of funding organizations like the NEA and the increasing importance of the relationship between arts organizations and communities created a different set of expectations as well as challenges to meet. Whereas women in the early 20th century could rely on governmental support of their work, women in the early 21st century faced a severely depleted and regulated funding scene, wherein funding organizations began to change expectations of dance. Since the NEA and other funders focused resources on diverse, collaborative, community-based projects, artists of the early 21st century adapted to meet those standards. Further, feminism's boom in the 1960s shifted the ways women were viewed in society, in the work force, and in social and cultural realms. Therefore, American funding organizations may have been more open to supporting women choreographers working in the early 21st century, whereas women in the early 20th century faced domestic expectations.

While women choreographers in the early 20th century did engage socially and politically with their work, they did so differently than did women choreographers working in the early 21st century. For example, Jane Dudley's claim that dance could evoke revolutionary change in society offers a blatant and consistent anti-government sentiment. Martha Graham's governmentally funded international tours clearly illustrated an adherence to a major political ideology as well. In comparison, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Pat Graney, and other choreographers working in the 21st century sought to empower and support the individual's growth to stimulate change in communities. Women choreographers working in the early 21st century were interested in the possible

political investments dance can make, but they seemed to participate on a smaller scale at the community or regional level.

Further, the way artistic processes meld with social and community values offer interesting possibilities for what arts in communities can support. These performance contexts and the relationships of artists to communities can be fluid and adaptable. For example, Graney's prison project and Lerman's community trainings have been presented in various settings, each with different needs and resources. Zollar has restructured a program specifically for the New Orleans community. These examples illustrate dance's ability to readapt to new circumstances, offering evidence of its relevance and necessity in a relentlessly changing and acclimating society—a society that citizens are still learning to cope with.

Judith Hamera, in the (2007) text *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference, and Connection in the Global City*, further elucidates the idea that dance can activate positive change in communities. She claims community-based, socially engaged dance forges new relationships, causing new social and political ideas to emerge. For Hamera, it does more than this: "it organizes communities around common idioms, rewrites space and time in its own image . . . it is also a template for arranging, deepening, and enchanting communities" (Hamera 2007, 208). In other words, dance can unite communities by bringing to light their best features, imagining future possibilities, and giving community members strategies for empowerment and solidarity. In this way, the work of Zollar, Graney, and Lerman demonstrates the political and social power of dance in early 21st century contexts. Duncan, Graham, and Dudley were also teasing out dance's implications and benefits for the communities they each served

in the early 20th century; their communities differed in scope and context from those served by dance in the early 21st century.

The six artists profiled above played active roles in the dance field in the early 20th and 21st centuries, each aligning their artistic practices with the shifting vision for and expectations of the arts in the U.S. That these women have developed their companies, consistently receiving funding, critical praise, and awards throughout these years indicate that they aligned and evolved their goals and practices with those values of funding organizations and the public. Clearly, the artists profiled have uniquely and innovatively tied their artistic ventures to the needs of the communities they serve and the evolving landscape of funding opportunities. Dance's social and political impact in communities at these particular points in history illustrates its adaptability and relevance through history. By establishing in this paper a unique connection between these two groups of women choreographers, new interpretations of dance history and its influence on the ways dance is made and used in American society emerge.

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