

History Senior Comps Proposal

The first half of the twentieth century marked a revolution in American dance. Young dancers began to break the bonds of classical ballet and transcend the limitations of sideshow burlesque, their creative efforts culminating in what began to be known as modern dance. New York City has long served as the United States' capital of movement and it was here that a generation of women gathered to create some of the most influential and controversial dance works in history. The rejection of classical form and the de-centralization of gender divisions that had long accompanied most varieties of American dance complemented the global rise of "the new woman" in the 1920s and 30s and the emergence of more vocal brands of feminism, especially in America's cities. The periods that I will most closely examine in my paper – the central modern period (1923-1946) and the late modern period (1946-1957) – also coincided with tumultuous decades in American history. Rife with the anxieties of war and social upheaval, the work of many of these women choreographers reflected their own reactions to the times and actively worked against the stereotype that modern dance was wildly abstract and incomprehensible.

My paper will focus on women at the forefront of the American modern dance movement and the greater historical contexts that informed and influenced their work. I will pay special attention to how they reshaped femininity in their work and in their own lives and how their radicalism was received within the dance world and in American popular culture at large. I will also pay special attention to the vital contributions of black women choreographers like Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, whose intersections of womanhood and blackness caused their work to be overlooked even within the modern dance community. Finally, I would like to briefly investigate the exclusion of women choreographers since the American modern dance

movement. Modern dance in the United States was founded primarily by women; now the number of prominent female choreographers can be counted on one hand. In 2014, the New York Times went so far as to claim that “there is Twyla Tharp and then there are none” (Kourlas).

The sources listed in my working bibliography consist of books, scholarly articles, and newspaper articles on the history of American modern dance and dance theory, as well as footage of choreographers and their companies accessed online. These videos are my only primary sources so far; now I need to start looking for interviews with women choreographers from the decades I am focusing on as well as personal journals and autobiographies. While purely historical volumes like Julia L. Foulkes’ *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey* will help me to shape a timeline, essays like Judith Lynne Hanna’s “Patterns of Dominance: Men, Women, and Homosexuality in Dance” from *The Drama Review* will allow me to sink my teeth a little deeper into the more nuanced aspects of women’s role in the evolution of modern dance.

Although I have already narrowed down my geographic boundaries to New York City, it might also help to choose a central group of choreographers to focus the bulk of my research on. Right now, my tentative list consists of Martha Graham, Pearl Primus, Doris Humphrey, Martha Hill, Katherine Dunham, and Hanya Holm. To establish a framework for my research, the first I will read is Olga Maynard’s *American Modern Dancers*. Published in 1965, it provides a unique literary perspective because it was written only a few years after my era of focus ends (1957). Most of the footage that I have found so far has been posted on YouTube, so I plan to watch more films from Linfield College’s film collection over the summer.

Working Bibliography

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