

Editor's Note

Dance and politics and/or politics in/of dance ranging across time and space are again strongly present in this third issue of 2018. As such, the preceding interview with Steve Paxton by Royona Mitri fits neatly into this frame, where the politics of race are raised in various ways, in five of the six articles that follow. I have placed the articles in terms of the time frame of the dance work(s) they address. The first two articles focus on particular dance pieces by modern dancers, Mary Wigman and Hanya Holm (Kattner), and Katherine Dunham (Cadús) respectively; the third and fourth articles take us to the USA in the 1960s to question first what was considered to be a minimalist dance piece by Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton (Morse); followed by an analysis of two postmodern dance works in the 1960s by Rainer and 1970s by Trisha Brown (Chaleff) that brings the notion of the supremacy of whiteness to the fore. The penultimate essay shifts the discussion to post-apartheid South Africa and the question of race within “ballet diplomacy” (Lauer), while the final article considers three particular works by British contemporary choreographers that can be seen to challenge the traditional power relations between “audience and performer” (Burt).

In “From *Totenmal* to *Trend*: Wigman, Holm, and Theatricality in Modern Dance,” Elizabeth Kattner addresses the shift towards “theatricality in modern dance” by means of a detailed comparative analysis of Wigman’s 1930 piece, *Totenmal*, which was co-directed by Holm in Germany, and Holm’s own “first major dance composition, *Trend*,” (Lloyd 1949, 162), since moving to the United States in 1931, which was first performed at the Bennington Festival in 1937. Kattner’s study considers the thematic frame of both these works, the relationship between group and solo choreography, lighting design and their reception in relation to the social contexts of the period, with the rise of nationalist socialism in Germany that Wigman came to actively support from 1933 when Hitler came to power, while Holm, who moved to the United States in 1931 to head the Wigman school in New York, distanced herself from that regime and Wigman’s political stance. Kattner argues that although the “production values” of *Totenmal* can be evidenced in *Trend*, these values were also incorporated into “fascist works” with very dissimilar results. While *Trend* was successful, as Kattner shows, *Totenmal* was not considered to be so. The mysticism embedded in the latter, Kattner suggests, enabled “ambiguity” in regard to interpretation. Nonetheless, she argues that *Totenmal* shifted the “art of modern dance,” and it was through the learning process of co-directing that production that upskilled Holm to successfully create *Trend*.

Eugenia Cadús’s article, “Katherine Dunham and Peronism: An Analysis of Dunham’s *Tango* (1954),” moves the discussion of the relationship between dance and politics to Argentina, to examine whether Dunham’s piece can indeed be shown to be a “dance of protest” against the Peronist regime, as some have suggested. In so doing, Cadús sets out the policies of the populist Peronist state. She also considers Dunham’s take on Peronism during her stay in Argentina in light of the elite groups she mostly met and mixed with, and how the dance was received by audiences and reviewers. From this analysis, Cadús argues convincingly that “*Tango*” was not viewed as a dance of protest by audiences, as perhaps Dunham had intended, and several other scholars have suggested. Rather, it was in alignment with the cultural norms of the populist Peronist state. Interestingly, Cadús takes stock of the costumes revealed in the photos of *Tango*, which were of

the style worn by workers of the day, which in turn was the very style that constituted a key marker of populist Peronism.

The third article, by Meredith Morse, is aptly titled “Minimalist’ Dance, Social Critique: Revisiting Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton’s 1963 *Word Words*.” Morse reviews and questions how this work, which was performed once in a New York loft and was only viewed by a small audience, which included Sally Banes, has been labelled as “minimalist” by dance scholars such as Banes and Ramsay Burt. Morse sets out to demonstrate that contrary to this minimalist or “analytic” categorization, *Word Words* utilized “underground” ploys of the period that involved “female (and male) impersonation” that destabilized the “gender binaries.” Morse’s analysis of the piece draws on the political aspects of camp as articulated by queer theorist Moe Meyer and that of Pamela Robertson, whose concern, as Morse points out, is to “recover” camp for feminism. Contrary to viewing *Word Words* as an analytic piece akin to what was going on in the fine arts at that time, Morse seeks to reposition it as a “deeply radical move.”

In “Activating Whiteness: Racializing the Ordinary in US American Postmodern Dance,” Rebecca Chaleff continues the current interest in re-visiting and reassessing American postmodern dance. As the title suggests, Chaleff examines American postmodern dance’s pre-occupation with ordinary everyday bodies, as opposed to an emphasis on highly trained bodies, which was a key feature of modern dance. She argues that this shift is underpinned by a universal construct of ordinariness, which in effect carries the residue “of the performers’ race,” through what she labels as “the enduring invisibility of whiteness.” Following dance scholars like Susan Manning and Susan Foster, and the feminist scholar Sara Ahmed’s article on “The Phenomenology of Whiteness” (2007), among others, Chaleff marshals her argument by drawing on the notion of the “normalization of whiteness” that is founded on the exclusion of racial difference, by effectively taking two postmodern dance works, Yvonne Rainer’s *Trio A* (1966) and Trisha Brown’s *Locus*, as case studies, along with her own practice-based experience of the difficulty of learning *Trio A*, as a phenomenological methodological tool.

“Dancing for the Nation: Ballet Diplomacy and Transnational Politics in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” by Meryl Lauer, is based on findings drawn from a fascinating ethnographic study of a prominent ballet company, Goetang Ballet in South Africa, that took place over fourteen months between 2012 and 2015. The company’s name is a pseudonym. In order to protect the identity of the participants, all reporting of the dancers’ testimonies in interview and their conversations with the author are compilations of a range of voices, dates and places, as are discussions with teachers, administrators, events, etc. As the title of the article indicates, Lauer’s analysis reveals a layering and interweaving of the company’s “ballet diplomacy,” primarily with Cuba, which involves “trans-national circulation of dancers, teachers” etc., and is underpinned by the notion of “the nation.” The dancers’ bodies, Lauer contends, are put into play here, in support of the state apparatus. She argues that this current “transnational ballet politicking” requires contextualizing in relation to the history of South Africa, which in turn brings into focus the continuing issue of race and “enduring forms of white hegemony” in ballet in that country.

The final article, by Ramsay Burt, “Avoiding Capturing,” moves north to the United Kingdom to consider three recent contemporary pieces by choreographers, Nicola Conibere, Katye Coe, and Alexandrina Hemsley and Jamila Johnson-Small. Burt frames his analysis of the three works, *Assembly* (Conibere 2013), *(To) Constantly Vent* (Coe 2014), and *Voodoo* (Hemsley and Johnson-Small 2017), with reference to the French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre’s work, *The Production of Space*, which was published in French in 1974 but not translated into English until 1991. While Lefebvre’s text has been an important impetus in new developments in social geography for example, it seems to be resurfacing in dance studies, where place, site and space are highlighted, as for instance in Valerie Briginshaw’s (2001) book and Ketu Katrak’s (2018) article on Jay Pather’s site-specific works in the previous issue of this journal. Through his

observations and analyses, Burt persuasively argues that the relationship between bodies and spaces in the three performances under consideration indicated above, avoid being “captured” by challenging the dominant spatial and visual ideology that underpins the established relationship between performer and audience. For example, he describes how this was achieved by leaving the performers and audience “free to relate with each other in different ways,” in a “non-performance space” such as a library room or a gallery, or a theatrical space that is disrupted by “physical changes” to the conventions of the proscenium by welcoming the audience into the performance space that is usually occupied by the performers, thus establishing a closer relation between them.

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Works Cited

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