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On: 01 May 2012, At: 11:44

Publisher: Routledge

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Dance Chronicle

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ldnc20>

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Andrea Harris

Available online: 14 Mar 2012

To cite this article: Andrea Harris (2012): Gendered Discourses in American Ballet at Mid-Century: Ruth Page on the Periphery, *Dance Chronicle*, 35:1, 30-53

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2011.650619>

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Gendered Discourses in American Ballet at Mid-Century: Ruth Page on the Periphery

ANDREA HARRIS

At mid-century, American ballet was transformed at the hands of its most prominent critics. This radical aesthetic shift affected received historical narratives, and women's place within them. Ruth Page offers an interesting case: a woman ballet choreographer who earned a place in dance history, but is often cast as second rate. This article examines the way in which critics employed gender as a means of creating generic and aesthetic oppositions in postwar American ballet. Two of Page's ballets of the late 1930s are also discussed to suggest frameworks for producing new understandings of women's work in ballet.

To the question that drives this special issue of *Dance Chronicle*—Where are ballet's women choreographers?—Ruth Page presents a complicated reply. Despite her continued visibility in American dance for much of the twentieth century, she receives at best a couple of sentences in most dance history texts to this day. Even though she is routinely marginalized, Page is not “hidden from history”; she *is* one of ballet's women choreographers who appears in the dance-historical narrative more often than not.* Yet her status therein remains somewhat dubious: included, but evaluated as second rate. For example, in *The Shapes of Change: Images of American Dance* (1979) Marcia Siegel writes of Page, “Although most of her ballets have not been seen or discussed by serious dance writers, one gathers from contemporary accounts that she put on a good show and did not add much to choreographic progress.”¹ Page does not fare much better in a more recent dance history text either: as Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick explain in *No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century*, “although based on highly original concepts and often beautifully decorated, her works were thin in

* The phrase “hidden from history” refers to Shelia Rowbotham's influential book of the same title, which helped to launch a movement in feminist scholarship to uncover the previously lost stories of women in the 1970s. *Hidden From History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (London: Pluto Press, 1973).

choreographic substance, as though the steps were merely a necessary filler in the realization of an idea."² What are we to make of such an assessment, echoed over nearly three decades of dance historiography? Was Page's choreography just bad—worthy of mention but not of deeper ("serious") critical investigation?^{*}

When I first became interested in Page, I was intrigued by the lack of available information on her, and I hoped to uncover more about a woman ballet choreographer about whom I knew little. However, as theater historian Susan Bennett notes, such recovery work is only partial. Bennett argues that the addition of women into the historical narrative often relies on "some performance of a filial relation" to the male-authored works already in the canon or to already established criteria for aesthetic or historical importance; thus, "despite *knowing* that there is other work to be done, historiographic method inevitably pulls our history—even our alternative histories—back into the trajectory of what has always already been known."³ Bennett asks how feminist scholars can move beyond supplementing, to supplanting, theater history, a project she admits is complicated and difficult. In another project, I had been examining the years around World War II as a crucial period that transformed the history and theory of American ballet, and I began to wonder how the historiographic processes that have shaped our understanding of American dance might occlude our view of women's contributions in the way that Bennett describes. What received methods, selections, and priorities undergird the historical assessment of Page as a second-rate choreographer? What assumptions do concepts like "choreographic progress" and "substance" rest upon, and how—and by whom—were these understandings produced? If the history of dance modernism is viewed not as a continual progression of aesthetic renovations, but rather as a "dynamic field of constantly evolving, aesthetic-political 'positions,'" then how can we re-conceive of such criteria as sites of aesthetic and ideological struggle as opposed to agreed-upon standards in the field?⁴

The 1930s were, indeed, a period of intense aesthetic-political struggle over questions of modernism and nationalism as dance critics wrestled to delineate and define a truly "American" manifestation of ballet. The interwar trend in American ballet was not classicism, but rather a "heterodoxical" style of choreography that was "rich in drama and historical texture."⁵ Yet by

* Page has not been widely studied by dance scholars, with a few important exceptions. Joellen A. Meglin's recent studies are significantly augmenting the available scholarship on Page; for example, "Choreographing Identities Beyond Boundaries: *La Guiblesses* and Ruth Page's Excursions into World Dance," *Dance Chronicle*, vol. 30, no. 3 (2007): 439–69, and "Blurring the Boundaries of Genre, Gender, and Geopolitics: Ruth Page and Harald Kreutzberg's Transatlantic Collaboration in the 1930s," *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2009): 52–75. Other analyses of Page include Elizabeth Cooper, "Dances About Spain: Censorship at the Federal Theatre Project," *Theatre Research International*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2004): 232–46.

the 1950s, a neoclassical style, exemplified by the plotless works of George Balanchine, was considered the model American ballet. Neoclassical ballet emphasized classical vocabulary and either eliminated or strictly reduced elements of design, narrative, and mimetic gesture. Today, it is commonly agreed across critical, popular, and historical dance discourses that Balanchine's modernist neoclassicism represents the "Americanization" of ballet. But this understanding stems from a transformation in American ballet in which a representational aesthetic was superseded by an objectivist one that placed the abstract formal features of a work over its content as the defining element in what made the form truly "American." This radical aesthetic shift transformed the history and theory of American ballet.⁶

My concern here is the way in which changing meanings of modernist practices and purposes in American ballet were reconstructed through gendered oppositions. Feminist art, theater, and literature scholars have garnered an extensive bibliography on the gendered dimensions of modernism, overwhelmingly concluding that modernism is "masculinized" in contrast to the realist, popular, and sentimental forms coded as its feminine other.⁷ But a similar question of how gender operates in the discursive construction of modernism itself has been asked less often in dance studies.* I argue that the reconstitution of modernism in ballet discourse during and after the war was itself a gendered practice in which representational ballet choreographies were cast as feminine against neoclassicism's masculinity.

This is where Ruth Page enters my story. In 1936, musing about the creation of a native ballet form, John Martin wrote that Page's "good theatre sense," "engaging ideas as to scenarios," lack of "any artiness or any catering to esthetic snobbery," and use of "flavorous music, décor, and costumes" made vital contributions to the successful future of ballet in the nation.⁸ As he commended Page for turning her back on the "audience of professional balletomanes . . . in favor of a broadly popular appeal," Martin likely was thinking of the parts of *America Dancing*, his book published that year, in which he castigated ballet's "academicians" and "wealthy patrons" for insisting on "the body as an instrument of pure design."⁹ By so doing, ballet substituted "the creed of sybaritism and snobbery" for dance's real potential to uncover the "deep-rooted experiences of human living."¹⁰ While in 1936 Page was central to Martin's vision of a "really serviceable American ballet theatre," forty years later he would describe her approach as "feminine" and "distinctly French."¹¹ Martin's changing rhetoric points to this turbulent

* A notable exception is Mark Franko's analysis of Martha Graham's attempts to negotiate the tensions between "feminine" expressional dance and "masculine" abstraction; see *Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 39–57. Gay Morris also mentions the masculinized nature of criticism on Alwin Nikolais and Merce Cunningham's objective choreography; see *A Game for Dancers: Performing Modernism in the Postwar Years, 1945–1960* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 196–97.

period in modernist ballet, a time that redefined issues of genre, aesthetics, and national identity.

The radical aesthetic shift in American ballet rested upon the writing of three influential critics: Martin, Edwin Denby, and Lincoln Kirstein. As the sole full-time dance critic in New York City, writing for the prestigious *New York Times*, Martin was regarded as “the undisputed voice of authority in the dance world.”¹² Although his career was largely linked to the new modern dance, Martin was writing extensively about ballet by the mid 1930s, which figured significantly in his developing theory of American dance. Denby, who wrote for the *New York Herald Tribune* and *Modern Music*, is typically remembered for his objectivity—as one choreographer describes, “His major putdown word was ‘admirable.’”¹³ (We will see that this is not exactly true.) While Denby may have advocated impartiality, he was the primary architect of the postwar notion that neoclassicism was the exemplary American ballet over other modes of choreography. Indeed, Denby’s vision of neoclassical ballet continues to cast a long shadow over dance criticism.* And although Kirstein was the only one of these three writers who never held a long-term position in dance journalism, as a critic, patron, administrator, and historian, he was the helmsman of the American ballet and the course it took in the twentieth century.

Throughout the mid-twentieth century the field of journalistic dance criticism was small but mighty, as the borders between the newspaper dance column and the emerging narrative of American modernist dance remained thin. These critics’ objective was not only to write about dance, but also to establish dance as a serious and, above all, an American art form. This agenda required them to craft simultaneously pedagogical frameworks for how to see and how to understand dance in historical, theoretical, and evaluative terms. I explore how Martin, Kirstein, and Denby attempted to analyze dance, establishing categories of genre and aesthetic function in that process. As boundaries were drawn between choreographic styles, hierarchies of aesthetic value were constructed, in large part through assumptions about sexual difference. Within this larger picture, two ballets choreographed by Page suggest what such aesthetic hierarchies have obscured and their consequences for women ballet choreographers.

* Denby’s notion of American neoclassical ballet echoes, for example, in Deborah Jowitt’s description of the New York City Ballet dancers’ “boldness,” “frankness,” “speed,” and “unself-conscious dignity and courtesy as attributes of American character at its best,” or in Alastair Macaulay’s account of how the Balanchine dancer’s “blazing energy” and “full-toned audacity” were “startling to European eyes and an embodiment of American character” in the mid-twentieth century. Deborah Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 274; Alastair Macaulay, “Mother Ship Off Balance, Balanchine Still Soars,” *New York Times*, November 14, 2008.

Although in 1936 Martin saw Page as a good candidate for creating an American ballet form, her time in the spotlight was brief, for the critical landscape was already shifting.* A mere two years after he had commended Page's choreography for its theatricality and popular address, Martin launched a series of attacks in his *New York Times* column on the disturbing trends he saw in American dance: representation, accessibility, and stylistic mixing. These columns pointed not only to changes in Martin's own criticism, but also to the aesthetic positions grappling for dominance in American modernist dance.

In a 1938 essay, Martin argued that American dance had neglected abstraction. By becoming too reliant on realism and narrative, and too concerned with understandability, dance failed to recognize its own "function and entity as dance" and rendered itself "powerless." "We will get nowhere," warned Martin, "by insisting that [dance] substitute for pantomime, drama, literature or the soapbox."¹⁴ Soon after this, a second column condemned dances that strove for accessibility as pandering to "the National Association of Twelve-Year-Old-Minds," Martin's made-up organization whose "underlying philosophy is that of passivity." Pressure to make easily understood works threatened to turn dance into "a national mass-production industry," and choreographers who catered to such demands ceased to be artists and instead became "showmen—cute, coy, gay, graceful, coquettish, pictorial, smart, virtuoso—with all the spurious theatrics that can be raked together."¹⁵ The following month, Martin's column took aim at the practice of combining ballet and modern movement vocabularies in choreography. Ballet and modern dance, Martin argued, were separate forms with opposite purposes, and even to try to combine these two forms indicated "such an egregious misapprehension of both the ballet and the modern dance that it is hard to understand how dancers entertaining such notions could possibly have functioned successfully in either field."¹⁶

Historically, Martin's swelling calls for greater abstraction and autonomy are not surprising. Representation and popular appeal became increasingly contentious concepts in art criticism through the 1940s, as artistic methods that invited mass appeal, whether through content, emotional address, or representation, were increasingly linked to a "deviant mass politics," whether fascist propaganda, Soviet social realism, or the commodifying tendencies of the capitalist market.[†] The boundaries between ballet and modern dance were more fluid in the 1930s, the contours of those genres being still under

* Meglin notes that already in the mid 1930s, critics had begun expressing their discomfort with Page's use of mimesis and narrative, as well as her popularity. See "Blurring the Boundaries," 63.

† Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 389. Mark Franko has also argued that the inconsistencies in Martin's definition of abstraction often emerged in conjunction with his criticism of left-wing dance, whose political and emotional agenda threw a wrench into

construction.¹⁷ Martin's essay heralds the establishment of ballet and modern dance as not only separate, but also "opposite" genres. As part of this generic differentiation, modernism acquired a radically different visage in modern dance than in ballet—a contrast built as much on the varying ideological purposes of these genres as on shifting definitions of abstraction.

For much of the 1930s, Martin had a hard time believing that ballet could actually become "modern," which he defined in his 1936 *America Dancing* as dance that "reflects its own environment, that grows out of the life and conditions of its immediate time and place."¹⁸ The enemy of a truly modern art was the "academician," with his love of codes, technical systems, and tradition.¹⁹ Martin put ballet, "the archetype of sterility and abstraction," in this second camp.²⁰ Ballet was far too reliant on its set system, stuck in an archaic worldview that separated art from life, and was therefore unable to respond meaningfully to the conditions of the modern day. Three years later, in *Introduction to the Dance*, the *New York Times* critic again claimed that America had not yet realized a modern ballet. Yet he now located ballet's window on modernist status in the genre's "geometrical-aesthetic basis," writing, "ballet must inevitably cast aside . . . all its accumulation of 'aids'—music, décor, drama—and concentrate on its own nature and essential medium . . . the academic code of abstract movement, which it has built up over the centuries."²¹ In other words, Martin now argued that ballet must move even farther toward the inherent abstraction for which he had condemned it as hopelessly anti-modern in his previous book.

As Gay Morris notes, by the 1950s Martin had undergone a significant change of heart, as he began celebrating Balanchine's neoclassical style as a trailblazer in modernist ballet.²² The key to this critical about-face lies in Martin's process of coming to terms with the modernist tenets of abstraction, which remained contentious for his theory of dance. Clement Greenberg may have called for the avant-garde artist to turn "his attention away from subject-matter or common experience [and turn] it in upon the medium of his own craft," but Martin believed that "[n]o movement of the human body is possible without definite relation to life experience."²³ In the 1930s, Martin wrestled with this dilemma in his criticism—how to negotiate between, on the one hand, his own conception of a modern dance whose emotional expressivity was socially liberating and on the other hand, the surging tides of formalism in modernist discourses. This problem turned on the issue of abstraction.

In *America Dancing*, Martin identified two different meanings of abstract: one "used to describe that which concentrates within its own small dimensions the substance of something greater and more expansive than

Martin's efforts to bring dance into the annals of high modernism. See Franko, *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 113–19.

itself," the other attempting "to make use of the body as an instrument of pure design."²⁴ The first lay within the domain of modern dance; the latter within that of ballet. (However, as stated, at the time he was writing this book Martin still doomed ballet to failure as a modern form because its abstract nature was incapable of expressing human experience.) A couple of years later, in the 1938 column on abstraction, Martin conflated these two different definitions. "Abstraction, as we all know," he began, "is that approach to the dance which puts aside all dramatic and literary program, and deals exclusively in terms of movement." Yet in the next breath, he described abstraction as the process of universalizing meaning: "The petty and the personal must be sifted out of his creation, leaving only those universally recognizable elements of [the artist's] experience which mark it as of all men."²⁵

As he was working out his theory of metakinesis, which depended on the choreographer's ability to use abstraction to extract deep human truths out of personal experience, Martin surely had to come to terms with the fact that ballet seemed to do abstraction, at least in the "new critical" sense of formalism and autonomy, better than modern dance, which continued to rely on many literary elements. One resolution to this conundrum was to theorize modern dance and ballet as contrasting genres with clearly opposite purposes. Ballet, Martin explained in his 1939 column on the ballet-modern "hybrid," was fundamentally objective, while modern dance was subjective in nature. The modern dancer began with personal experience, and used abstraction to reveal the wider human relevance of those experiences. In contrast, the ballet dancer's job was to embrace the strictly abstract nature of her medium.²⁶

This bifurcated concept of abstraction formed the means by which Martin differentiated between ballet and modern dance as separate genres—a classification he codified that same year in *Introduction to the Dance*. Martin distinguished between three historical and aesthetic periods: classicism, romanticism, and modernism. Whereas classicism dealt with objective criteria, tradition, and intellectual reflection, he argued, romanticism embraced spontaneity and contemporary content, inviting the viewer's emotional participation. The risk of the romantic attitude, however, was the collapse of art into formless self-expression; luckily, modernism's emphasis on form and function saved the romanticist from such indulgence. A product of technological progress, modernism took its efficiency and economy from the machine. But the machine had also changed the purpose of art by rupturing the long-held concept of verisimilitude. Once technological output outdid the artist in producing realistic representations of the world, the artist had an epiphany: "he awoke to see that what was valuable in art was its very incapacity to represent nature with this infallible accuracy." Art could now embrace the qualities of taste, selection, and interpretation that separated human beings from the machine. The modern artist thus discovered the principle "by which

the essential qualities of an object or an experience or a concept could be abstracted from the mass of irrelevancies surrounding it and given more value than nature itself had given them." In abstraction, Martin concluded, "lay the complete answer to representationalism, the complete defiance of the machine in art."²⁷ A by-product of the machine age, abstraction was the very thing that could subvert its rationalizing and commodifying effects.

If the concept of abstraction was confounded in Martin's earlier criticism, in *Introduction to the Dance*, he firmly established it as a process of stripping away the "mass of irrelevancies" in real life to illuminate the essential nature of all human experience. This definition of abstraction supported his influential theory of modern dance as a process of expressive exchange between dancer and viewer, if a choreographer would successfully adapt her inner impulses into objective form. But somewhat surprisingly, Martin next attempted to make theoretical peace with classical ballet. Even though classical art had "no direct concern with life experience to begin with," modernism's emphasis on functional form opened up new territory for the classicist, too, by leading him toward the inherent purity of his materials and totally freeing him from representation. "Every effort to introduce realistic life impulses [in ballet]," wrote Martin, "tends to destroy its classic purpose and to nullify its abstract effectiveness." In marked contrast to his earlier condemnations of ballet's reliance on systemized movement vocabulary, Martin now saw the exemplification of abstraction in ballet's "inherent autonomous potentialities" as a complete removal from all elements of realistic life. Although the strictures of the classical code may appear similar to the precision of the machine, if practiced with conscious artistry, classical technique did not regiment bodies, but actually highlighted the individuality of the dancers. The ballet dancer's quest for perfection was not dehumanizing, but rather epitomized the ideal essence of the very human qualities—taste, selectivity, free will—needed to counter the mechanization of mass culture. Indeed, if ballet's "underlying aesthetic intent is apprehended," Martin concluded, the "dancer becomes a sensuous and sentient object maintaining balance against all hazards."²⁸

Introduction to the Dance gave integrated shape to many of the ideas threaded through Martin's earlier writings. He resolved two competing notions of abstraction by making modernism a historical destiny in art, one that necessarily involved the abandonment of representation (now the stuff of mass production) and the abstraction of essentials from human experience. Although ballet and modern dance were "opposite" genres, both could achieve modernist status if they accomplished this abstraction of universal human truths. But if abstraction was the objective in both genres, the goals differed significantly. Whereas modern dance began with subjective experience that must be made autonomous, ballet started with an already autonomous code, and thus the ballet choreographer's job was to preserve the inherently abstract nature of the genre by shunning all elements of

realistic life. Martin thus assigned distinctly different ideological purposes to modern dance and ballet: the first transmitted human experience universally; the second strove for “a timeless and placeless idealization of [the dancer] and him alone, against a backdrop of infinity.”²⁹

Mark Franko describes the “ballet-versus-modern wars” that Martin and Kirstein waged with one another throughout the 1930s as the progenitors of an ideological opposition between ballet and modern dance in dance history.³⁰ But at the turn of the 1940s, classical ballet’s idealism, the idea that its formal features signaled higher truths, was a point on which the two critics agreed. Martin’s 1939 call for a new modern classicism signaled a turning point in ballet criticism. Throughout most of the 1930s, Kirstein’s idea of an “American” ballet was still dependent on stories and characters, and, despite his polemics against what he saw as the artistic limitations of modern dance, the ballets Kirstein produced in that decade leaned heavily on modern dance methods and institutions.³¹ But in 1939 (and in direct response to Martin’s *Introduction to the Dance*) Kirstein advanced his own nascent notion of classical autonomy: “Any idiosyncratic comment on [ballet] appears as offensive mannerism [and] destroys the linear purity of classicism.”³² By the mid 1940s, Kirstein was following Balanchine, who declared, “Choreographic movement is an end in itself, and its only purpose is to create the impression of intensity and beauty.”³³ Kirstein and Martin were not alone; Edwin Denby also began to distinguish between “literary” and “plastic” meaning in ballet in the late 1930s, especially in Balanchine’s works, a distinction on which much of his career would rest.³⁴ With his *Ausdruckstanz* background, Denby’s ability to see and to articulate the formal elements of dance—spatial line and tension, dynamics, and rhythm—surpassed that of his peers in the United States, and arguably upped the formalist ante in New York dance criticism in the late 1930s. “Balanchine seems to have two styles,” he mused in 1937, one filled with “poignant interchanges and a subtle, very personal fragrance,” the other, “the opposite of the first,” created by “unmistakable clarity of groupings and of directions; on rapid oppositions of mass, between single figures and a group; and above all on an amazing swiftness of locomotion”³⁵ This latter side of Balanchine pointed to what Denby would eventually come to see as “a direct new classicism” that spoke not to the emotions or the conscience, but to the human spirit.³⁶

* Denby studied at Hellerau-Laxenburg, the former school of Émile Jaques-Dalcroze that was transformed into a center for *Ausdruckstanz* in the 1920s. Following his graduation, Denby was first accepted into Kurt Jooss’s company (he quit after one week), then worked as the partner-collaborator of Cläre Eckstein, a student of Mary Wigman. Denby danced with Eckstein until he left Germany in 1933, making appearances at the 1930 German Dance Congress. See Edwin Denby, *Dance Writings*, ed. Robert Cornfield and William Mackay (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 16–21. Also Karl Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture, 1910–1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 17, 119–21, 291–92.

Through the 1940s and 1950s, these critical powerhouses—Martin, Kirstein, and Denby—reframed American modern ballet, clamping down a classical ideal where none had existed before, and retheorizing it as an intrinsic formal purity that required the elimination (or at least strict reduction) of external elements.* This process required that the differences between abstract neoclassicism and other modes of ballet choreography be defined and understood. Critics now focused on delineating generic boundaries within ballet itself, a project done in service of establishing abstract neoclassicism as the style that best exemplified American values and identity.

Kirstein's 1930s books on ballet made little effort to distinguish between ballet styles, but his 1959 *What Ballet Is About* was rife with classifications: "Ballet," "THE Ballet," "Classic Ballet," and "Character Dancing" (plus a host of national styles). Kirstein repeatedly differentiated ballet classicism from its Romantic and theatrical predecessors, making clear that these methods were no longer appropriate for modern works. For example, he first defined Romanticism historically, as nineteenth-century "ballets in which pantomime or character-dancing predominated over the school-exercise academic vocabulary." Yet he quickly set these techniques apart from classicism, arguing, "Romantic Ballet today is a category which does not, like the developed classic dance, renew itself. Oddly enough, the archetypal Romantic works (*Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, *Coppélia*) are now considered The Classics, . . . in spite of an insistent presence of theatricalized folk-dancing and quasi-operatic pantomime." In the present day, such antiquated methods were the self-indulgent converse of contemporary neoclassicism, as "nothing is less classical, or indeed less 'modern' than a lazy approximation of romantic classicism or the classic romanticism of a past epoch."³⁷

"THE Ballet" was Kirstein's term for the Diaghilev tradition that predominated in the United States for the first half of the twentieth century. Although responsible for "the first statement of a 'modern' classicism," early Diaghilev works were "frequently more interesting as paint, poetry, music, or personality than as dancing itself." Contemporary choreography in that tradition could only be seen as "[r]etardative repertoires which . . . try to make the audience believe that THE Ballet and the *Classic Ballet* are one and the same." Classical ballet also contrasted with character dancing: whereas the former enjoyed "maximum legibility," the latter was marked by "a blunted legibility; its roughness helps it characterize a particular place or epoch." Kirstein's narrative culminated in the American neoclassical style, epitomized by Balanchine's abstract choreography, which "dominat[ed] the epoch." Taking as its subject matter "the impermanence of mortal performance alongside its

* Only a handful of Balanchine's dances can actually be said to embrace such formal purity. How critics dealt with such discrepancies is a story I will tell in my projected book on this research.

chances for ephemeral perfection” instead of “a narrative explication of fading flowers or distraught innocence,” neoclassical ballet weathered not only the demands of time, but also the demands of modernity, signifying “the mastery of the human body over the machine.”³⁸

Not merely a history of ballet, Kirstein’s book also theorized classicism as formally pure. The introduction of literary or mimetic elements into ballet destroyed its classical purpose, and ballets that incorporated these features were at best “more interesting” as other art forms than as dance, or at worst “lazy” or “retardative.” Ballet, Kirstein concluded, strove “to raise public and performer to some transitory terrestrial paradise.”³⁹ Like Martin’s “timeless and placeless” ballet dancer, for Kirstein the goal of classical dancing was to impart an experience of temporary untethering from the exigencies of modern life.

In Kirstein’s theorization, representational choreographic modes were “blunted,” bound to local and historical elements, while abstraction was universal and transcendent. Several scholars have pointed out the gender biases in such a formulation, which often consigned immediacy, materiality, and detail to women, while the ideal, the universal, and the sublime were seen as the prerogative of the male subject.⁴⁰ As postwar critics established abstract neoclassicism as the best model for an American ballet, they repeatedly opposed it to other styles of ballet choreography no longer deemed adequate for a national modernist form.* In this process, generic and aesthetic categories were constructed and codified through a process of differentiation that persistently drew on biases about gender.

In a 1953 essay titled “Alec: Or the Future of Choreography,” Kirstein dreamt of a young, imaginary choreographer who, under Balanchine’s mentorship, would further the American ballet. Kirstein’s fictional tale began:

Just as a preponderance of great dancers in the past has been female, most of the choreographers have been male. . . . There are familiar parallels in other fields; lady painters have been far between. . . . Lady composers of music are more of a rarity, but [singers] are legion and actresses are numerous. Female architects are [also] scarce; choreography is the fluid architecture of human mass in space and time.⁴¹

“Alec” followed what Kirstein described (in quite phallic terms) as the “male principle” of choreography: “perfect power in perfect repose, hidden mastery, dominion, without apparent domination—the strength of the silent waters building up steadily purring dynamos in a dam whose walls were music

* While Martin, Denby, and Kirstein were the prime movers in the Americanization of neoclassical ballet, other critics also played a role. See Andrea Harris, “Choreographing America: Re-defining ‘American’ Ballet in the Age of Consensus,” in *Interrogating America through Theatre and Performance*, ed. Iris Smith Fischer and William D. Demastes (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 144–45.

and whose electricity was muscle.” Alec’s girlfriends did not like Balanchine, who “had no psychological overtones and never seemed to have been influenced by Joyce, Yeats, or Kafka.” But once Alec came to understand that ballet choreography was “not a projection of the personal,” but rather a process of “pattern-making,” he realized that “Choreography is an echoing of order, that all order is a reflection of a superior order, that all important art is religious art, and that he would never be merely a decorative artist.”⁴² As Kirstein reframed ballet choreography as strictly formal experimentation with the elements of space and time, he simultaneously cast it as a man’s activity—and a man’s history—precisely because of this abstract aesthetic signature. Literary and expressive devices, on the other hand, became “decorative” stuff that, literally, girls liked.

Kirstein’s “Alec” fable is unique among postwar criticism for its blatant attempt to ascribe a male body to neoclassical ballet. Yet many other critics employed gender as a discursive strategy for articulating difference between aesthetic concepts and categories. According to Joan Wallace Scott, “if we attend to the ways in which ‘language’ constructs meaning we will also be in a position to find gender.”⁴³ Scott explains, “Masculine/feminine serves to define abstract qualities and characteristics through an opposition perceived as natural: strong/weak, public/private, rational/expressive, material/spiritual are some examples of gender coding in Western culture since the Enlightenment.”⁴⁴ As the three most influential critics in the United States concurred, by the late 1940s, that neoclassicism was the best example of a truly American ballet, oppositions between choreographic styles were drawn in the gendered terms Scott describes. Modern neoclassical ballet was framed as the cerebral play of formal elements (“a game for dancers,” according to Denby);⁴⁵ it was vital and powerful, even to the point of danger or violence (“glittering in sharpness, in jets of power and tenuous resilient articulations . . . mystery of a menace withheld”);⁴⁶ and it embodied a universal ideal of human self-confidence, civility, and grace in the face of turbulent times (“the body’s possibility to move freely despite general dehumanization”).⁴⁷ In contrast, ballet choreography that embraced narrative or psychological representation was feminized as commercial, facilitating easy consumption, historically limited, and formally weak. Witness the following examples.

“Balanchine’s style,” wrote Denby in 1945, “moves you by the act of dancing, and not, as the fashion was from 1910–1940, by opposing to that act obstacles of various modes of mimicry—pictorial, psychological, musical, or social.”⁴⁸ But representational methods in ballet choreography were not only dismissed as artifacts of a bygone era, they were also increasingly described as non-American and feminine. “American ballet is like a straight and narrow path compared to the pretty primrose fields the French tumble in so happily,” parsed Denby, noting “the becks and nods, the spurts and lags, the breathless stops and almost-didn’t-make-it starts they cultivate in Paris, and cultivate so prettily.”⁴⁹ As for one of Balanchine’s more dramatic works

(*Tyl Ulenspiegel*), it was “George doing a turn as Dame Ninette: a carload of respectable ideas, props, pantomime . . . all of it honest and none of it dancing.”⁵⁰ And whereas Balanchine dancers danced right on top of the musical rhythm, British dancers literally lagged a step behind. “One doesn’t see the New York City company dragged by a score’s momentum, with opulent, swooning eyes and arms like a raped Europa,” Denby clarified.⁵¹

In contrast to foreign “prettiness,” American ballet embraced “a pioneer urge for speed, progress, and change,”⁵² with its “coherent, vigorous, positive, unsimpering movement,” “spontaneous, rhythmic pulse in action,” and “glittering speed to the point where it glitters like cut glass.”⁵³ Neoclassical ballet’s “powerful thrust” came from its intrinsic features—rhythm, spatial tensions, and kineticism—qualities that were especially revealed when representational elements were shorn from “the impersonal objective limitations of classic style.”⁵⁴ Through such objectivism, ballet turned “outside rather than inside,” acquiring a new, extroverted perspective that was the danced equivalent of Cold War consensus culture.⁵⁵ “So space spreads in calm power . . . from the moving dancer,” wrote Denby, “and gives a sense of human grandeur and destiny to her action.” Kirstein concurred: “For the ballet-artist, mastery of steps [implies] domination of space, as much above the floor as upon it.”⁵⁶ By cleaning out representation, the classical code shone as a model of rationality, civilized order, human idealism—and masculine force.

Denby played a major role in establishing neoclassicism as a quintessentially American style, a task he accomplished in part by repeatedly drawing contrasts between abstract and representational ballets. Denby found Page’s choreography particularly challenging—in his review of a 1946 production of Page’s *The Bells*, he scorned its expressive passages as “puerile” and “girlishly cute,” and found its “clichés of love and despair” better suited to a movie house audience.⁵⁷ But no matter the choreographer, all “gay local-color Americanism in ballet” was “too cute,” in Denby’s opinion.⁵⁸

It must be acknowledged that Denby typified representational techniques as feminine and foreign in men’s as well as women’s ballet choreography. Jerome Robbins’s “development of subject matter” and “descriptive gesture” were more like “modern or Central European dance” or Parisian mannerism than the “nonegotistic focus [and] disinterestedness of expression” in American neoclassicism.⁵⁹ Denby concluded that “as drama” Robbins’s choreography was “as good as the best Hollywood or Broadway successes”; nevertheless, the best ballet was “something quite different, quite freer.”⁶⁰ Antony Tudor’s use of stylized, realistic gesture was essentially “nondancing” that, in moderation, could add “pretty color” to a work, but sharply contrasted the “handsomeness” of neoclassicism.⁶¹ Tudor’s “gloom-steeped psychological . . . dramas of frustration” were “too weepy,” described Denby; scarred by a “weak and fragmentary dance impetus; they peter out at the end.”⁶² Likewise, Michel Fokine’s work for American Ballet Theatre (which Denby accused elsewhere of “glamorizing and

characterizing our ballet dancing on the European plan")⁶³ exemplified the sort of "sycophantically simpering piece" that seduced its audience with a "coy folksiness" and a "knowing giggle."⁶⁴ Léonide Massine made a wonderful "pictorial arranger," but because he failed to understand that "dancing is less pictorial than plastic, and pictures in dancing leave a void in the imagination," his ballets were "showmanship," in contrast to Balanchine's "work of genius."⁶⁵ Neoclassicism's kinetic power and clarity "not tuned to sentiment and charm, but to perspicuity and action" offered relief from the "tortured romantic disorder" of other ballet choreography.⁶⁶

According to Scott, gender offers "a good way of thinking about history, about the ways in which hierarchies of difference—inclusions and exclusions—have been constituted."⁶⁷ Through this lens, John Martin's changing language over a span of several decades is instructive with regard to how the critical constitution of aesthetic categories, constructed through appeals to sexual difference, had an impact on American ballet history, and Page's place in it. In the mid 1930s, Martin viewed Page as one of the best bets for the formation of a truly American ballet. Yet forty years later, in his biography of Page, Martin described her style as "distinctly French" and "eminently feminine."⁶⁸

Page, Martin wrote, was "the most basically feminine of all the woman choreographers working in the tradition of the classical ballet." This ultra-femininity came from her sense of the "chic," or attraction for things of "sumptuous irrelevance" and "panache." Comparing Page's choreography to the by-then dominant neoclassical ballet, Martin explained that "perfection does not need to be clothed and consequently does not inspire clothing; it is complete in its state of nudity and would be profaned by draping. [But] Ruth's ballet emerges as characteristically a form of symbolic *haute couture* . . . in its ultimate charm and substance. It makes for a warm and delicious aesthetic." Even as he meant to praise Page's creativity, Martin assigned her work to the female-identified realms of fashion and the kitchen, making her either the couturier or the Betty Crocker of her ballets, in explicit contrast to neoclassical purity. Martin summarized, "No matter how classic the technique she may employ or how modern her viewpoint, [Page] is fundamentally romantic in that she deals with people in situations, not simply with bodies in movement. . . . Much sound intellectual effort lies behind her results, but the works themselves are primarily sensory."⁶⁹ In this final statement, the impact of the postwar redefinition of American ballet is striking: although Page's choreography uses classical ballet movement, this usage by itself is not sufficient to categorize her approach as "classic," as long as narrative and representational elements are also present. In contrast to the purity and intellectuality of abstract neoclassicism, Martin cast Page's choreography as particular, decorative, domestic, romantic, sensual, and, ultimately, "feminine."

It is clear that critics gave American ballet a radical makeover in the 1940s: a new classical face that was powerful, dynamic, and masculine.

Page's ballets *An American Pattern* (1937) and *Frankie and Johnny* (1938), choreographed in collaboration with her partner and co-director, Bentley Stone, were made in the years immediately before Martin published his call for an objectivist, transcendent modernist ballet and the critical tides began to turn. Both works were featured on a 1938 program of the Chicago-based Federal Ballet, under the aegis of the Federal Theatre Project.⁷⁰ Page shared the commitment to socially progressive themes of several Theatre Project artists; moreover, both *An American Pattern* and *Frankie and Johnny* demonstrate her ongoing concern with how to address gender on the ballet stage in the 1930s.⁷¹ My descriptions of these dances are intended to illuminate the way in which elements of narrative, psychological characterization, emotionally expressive gesture, and the mixing of movement vocabularies—elements that would be deemed external to ballet in postwar criticism—function specifically to present the experiences of a female protagonist in American society. In other words, I hope to make clear how much subject matter mattered in these ballets.

Based on the popular ballad of the same name, *Frankie and Johnny* tells the story of a prostitute, Frankie, who murders her pimp/lover, Johnny, when she finds him cheating with Nellie, her streetwalker colleague (Figure 1). Many versions of the song exist, but most conclude with Frankie being sent to jail, the gallows, or the electric chair. In Page and Stone's adaptation, however, Frankie is not only *not* punished for the murder, but the ballet imparts a sense of empathy for her crime.*

Set in the present on a Chicago street corner outside a saloon and a brothel house, the ballet begins with townspeople entering and dancing in a colorful whirlwind of action, a realistic urban scene reminiscent of the lively street fair in *Petrouchka*. As the brothel opens, a group of businessmen methodically count their money, then one by one go up the steps in constrained, hiccupping hops, like products on an assembly line.

The choreography in *Frankie and Johnny* combines ballet, modern dance, jazz, tap, popular dance, and nondance movements. Such heterogeneous movement styles are used for expressive purposes, to develop character (or, as in the example of the businessmen, to paint broad caricatures of social groups), and to further the plot. In Frankie and Johnny's duet, which begins as the street scene clears, elements borrowed from modern dance illustrate the trusting and reciprocal nature of their relationship (setting up the dramatic climax of betrayal); moreover, they expand traditional gender roles in ballet partnering. When Johnny lifts Frankie, the lift initiates not from his

* My analysis is based on the videotape of the 1978 made-for-television restaging of the ballet. *Frankie and Johnny*, produced/directed by Richard Carter, staged by Frederic Franklin, performed by the Chicago Ballet, cassette 119, Ruth Page Video Archives (Chicago: Thea Flaum Productions, 1990).



FIGURE 1 Ruth Page and Bentley Stone in *Frankie and Johnny*, 1938. Courtesy of Barzel Dance Research Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

strength, but rather from the collective momentum created as their individual movements merge, sweeping Frankie into the air. Still other lifts demand equal strength and mutual counterbalance to support her body off the floor. In her earlier collaborations with the German expressionist dancer Harald Kreutzberg, Page had experimented with modern dance and the fluidity of gender roles.⁷² Here, the incorporation of modern dance elements of weight and momentum contrasts with the clear demarcation of gender roles in the traditional classical pas de deux.

When Frankie and Johnny leave each other, the townspeople return, and the street is again full of raucous action. Nellie enters, gets Johnny's attention, and they escape into the parlor house under Frankie's nose. Frankie coaxes the lascivious Bartender to tell her where Johnny has gone, exchanging a glimpse of leg for a piece of information. When she learns of Johnny's betrayal, Frankie beats the floor and her chest with her fists and pulses her foot against the ground, as if trying to drive the pain that is deep inside her body out through its extremities. Her legs rotate repeatedly in and out, first carrying her in a circular path that has no destination, then evolving into a rapid, breaking-apart quiver that travels up her torso, through her arms, and finally her head, which rolls jaggedly. As her solo progresses, Frankie's movement becomes wilder, throwing her through space. Her pirouettes are whipped, off-center, and precarious, ending not in balanced control, but in wild pitching. She runs to the brothel, pounds on the door, and disappears beneath the stairs when she sees Johnny and Nellie. Returning in a blood-red dressing gown with a long wedding-dress-like train and holding a gun, Frankie puts a ladder to the upstairs window, climbs it, and opens the shade to reveal Johnny and Nellie together. She scales the windowsill into the house, her dress still trailing down the ladder. Johnny and Nellie run out of the parlor house onto the porch, and Frankie shoots Johnny through the window.

Johnny falls and slides down the railing on his stomach, landing on top of his head with his legs sticking up in the air cartoon style. After a long moment of stillness, he arches backward until his knees touch the ground, and then rolls forward to lie on his stomach. Frankie darts around him, crossing her hands at her heart then extending them to Johnny. The fluttering quality of her movement expresses a levity that starkly contrasts the gravity of the situation. Pallbearers enter with a taplike shuffle, and the saloon opens up for the funeral. Most of the crowd focuses on the bar rather than on Johnny's casket. Frankie considers hanging herself from a lamppost, but Nellie stops her and the two women embrace and comfort one another, no rivalry between them. Frankie's guilt is quickly forgotten, and, as the two women dance side by side framed by a large wreath of lilies plucked from Johnny's casket, they console one another in a heavily staged mimicry of grief. The pallbearers fold Johnny feet over head into the casket and carry him off. Rather than arrest Johnny's murderer, the policeman on the scene follows Nellie into the brothel. As the final lines are sung—"This story ain't got no moral/ Oh, this story ain't got no end/ Oh, this story just goes to

show you/ You can't put your trust in any man"—a tear runs down Frankie's face and she shakes her head resignedly.

In general, feelings are portrayed in an overstated or deliberately contrived manner throughout the ballet. Frankie's solo upon learning of Johnny's cheating is unique for its sincere expressivity. Whereas her dancing is heartfelt and evokes empathy, Johnny's death is caricature and evokes laughter, providing a moment of comic relief that ultimately highlights the seriousness of Frankie's solo as the climactic scene in the ballet. The real tragedy of the ballet is not Johnny's murder, but rather Frankie's realization that "You can't put your trust in any man." This is the axis upon which the plot turns, encouraging the audience to understand Frankie's state of mind and to commiserate with it, rather than to judge her for the murder.

After Frankie kills Johnny, the theme of the ballet changes: it is no longer a story about love gone wrong, and it is not framed as a portrait of a woman oppressed by a male-dominated society. Against the backdrop of Johnny's funeral-turned-street-party, Frankie and Nellie neither blame one another for Johnny's cheating ways nor abandon their life of prostitution once released from their pimp's control. As Frankie says her last goodbye to Johnny, Nellie gets right back to work, escorting a policeman up the brothel stairs, leaving the suggestion hanging in the air that the women's work will resume even in their pimp's absence. The world without Johnny goes on much the same as before, except now the women are in charge. In its refusal to characterize the prostitute as submissive or victimized, the ballet contrasts with other contemporaneous choreographic depictions of prostitution as well as social feminist views at the time.

In contrast to the tongue-in-cheek *Frankie and Johnny, An American Pattern* takes acerbic aim at gender roles in American society.[†] Following the desperate search of the protagonist, named the Woman, for something

* Early twentieth-century social feminists tended to view the prostitute as a victim of excessive male desire and in need of rescue. See James Messerschmidt, "Feminism, Criminology and the Rise of the Female Sex 'Delinquent' 1880–1930," *Crime, Law and Social Change*, vol. 11, no. 3 (1987): 243–63. In Kurt Jooss's *The Green Table*, which premiered in New York in 1933, Ramsey Burt argues that the figure of the prostitute, a common trope in Weimar artworks, stands for the deleterious effects of modernity. However, the prostitute in *The Green Table* is manipulated like a doll, passively turned, swung, and partnered by the male characters—as Burt notes, her vulnerability to corruption relies on and reinforces social assumptions about femininity. The prostitute's symbolic lack of agency in Jooss's ballet markedly differs from the psychological and kinetic complexity and independence that Frankie's dancing conveys in *Frankie and Johnny*. Ramsey Burt, *Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, 'Race,' and Nation in Early Modern Dance* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 48–50, 53–54. "The Green Table, with the Joffrey Ballet," directed by Emile Ardolino, staged by Anna Markard, *Dance in America* (New York: PBS, 1982).

† My analysis of the choreography is based on the 1938 filming of the ballet in Chicago under the auspices of the Federal Theatre Project. *An American Pattern*, performed by Ruth Page, Bentley Stone, and members of the Federal Ballet, cassette 105, Ruth Page Video Archives (Chicago: Thea Flaum Productions, 1990).

meaningful in her life, the ballet presents marriage and domesticity as an inevitable fate with which she is eventually forced to comply. At the beginning of the dance, three businessmen in identical suits dance in unison as one precise, repetitive, mechanical unit, blending balletic steps with gestures imitating typing. When the Woman enters, all three robotically pop into an identical, cookie-cutter position, hands crossed at the heart and heads slightly tilted. One of the men separates from the pack to join the Woman, and the strains of the wedding march—which Page requested be “sarcastic in tune”—begin with a strangled-sounding little gasp.⁷³ A machine is wheeled onstage, the groom inserts a coin, and out pops a marriage certificate. The other men shake hands with the couple with exaggerated gestures and the wedding is complete.

The plot then follows the Woman through a series of extramarital affairs. Yet *American Pattern* is about neither the ins and outs of marriage nor sexual quest. Instead, the plotline serves as the framework for the ballet’s larger theme: an American woman’s flight from her domestic fate. This fate is symbolized by three ominous figures in long, dark dresses—the Matrons—whom Page characterized as “symbols of a terrifying conventionality.” The Matrons stand for the external social forces that push the Woman toward social conformity; moreover, as they continually haunt the edges of her experience, visible only to her, they also come to stand for the pressures *inside* her, for her own subconscious complicity with her oppression.

When the Matrons first appear, they hang suspended, clustered together, just inside the stage wings, then enter the space with a series of deep hiccupping contractions (in Martha Graham style) that reverberate from their bellies up through their torsos, as if they were vomiting up social conventions. The contractions bend them farther and farther forward at the waist until they lurch, rather than step, toward the Woman. The Matrons pursue the heroine throughout the ballet, always present, always watching and waiting. At the end of the ballet, exhausted from her fruitless search for fulfillment, the Woman collapses, and the Matrons approach her, ceremoniously bearing a feather duster and other symbols of domesticity. As Page wrote in her scenario, “In the end, she too must become a part of the pattern.” Page asked for only “a slight disturbance in the music” at this point, creating the ironic sense that, despite her clear dissatisfaction and distress, the Woman’s submission passes unnoticed in the ordinary course of events.

Page’s Woman embodies the “new woman,” who, according to historian Emily Rosenberg, “symbolized the expansion of consumption, greater independence, and the power to command relatively unsupervised leisure time” that marked a “new era” of modernization and Americanization after World War I.⁷⁴ The Woman in *American Pattern* is of this new modern age: she is (on the surface) independent, carefree, full of life, and fun-loving. She moves freely, lightly, and fleetingly; she embarks on adventure upon adventure. But despite these trappings, American modernity has failed to deliver

what it promised to the Woman. The inescapable presence of the Matrons serves as an incessant reminder that, in actuality, her choices are strictly circumscribed. If the “new woman” signified the promises of the American mass market—agency, independence, and freedom—then, in Page’s vision, these benefits are ironically unavailable for the American Woman, who, in the process of being confined to domestic regimens, is turned into a mass-produced commodity herself.*

To conclude, I want to highlight the friction between the two phenomena described in this article: (1) the discursive construction of representational choreographic methods as feminine in American postwar ballet criticism, and (2) Page’s use of representational techniques in these ballets as a strategic means of contesting rigid gender roles.[†] Janet Wolff distinguishes between two feminist methodologies: the first, “a politics of *correction*” that aims to recover lost women artists and add them to the existing canon; the second, “a politics of *interrogation*” that involves a more radical investigation of the historical processes that exclude them.⁷⁵ But my research on Page, and the gendered discourses surrounding her work, suggests that these dual processes—supplementing and supplanting the historical narrative—are more interrelated than commonly assumed. In this case, investigating the gendered assumptions that underlie our field’s foundational criteria for historical inclusion—innovation, formal experimentation, and, to recall some critics’ negative evaluation of Page, “choreographic progress”—not only recovers Page’s artistic contributions, but also invites new perspectives on how to reread a highly gendered canon and how to produce new knowledge of women’s work in ballet.

* On the “new woman” as a symbol of American systems of mass production and mass consumption after World War I, see Emily Rosenberg, “Consuming Women: Images of Americanization in the ‘American Century,’” *Diplomatic History*, vol. 23, no. 3 (1999), 481–87.

† As stated, Page created *Frankie and Johnny* and *American Pattern* in collaboration with her dance partner and co-director, Bentley Stone. According to George Dorris, Stone choreographed the bulk of *Frankie and Johnny*, while Page contributed her own part as Frankie. George Dorris, e-mail message to author, October 28, 2011; also “‘Frankie and Johnny’ in Chicago and Some Problems of Attribution,” *Dance Chronicle*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1995): 183. As I have argued, Frankie’s psychological expressivity and emotional appeal drive the dramatic arc of the ballet, and I see them as central to the exploration of gender and the social order in the work. I have not found similar documentation of how the choreographic labor was distributed in *American Pattern*; however, if Page and Stone’s method of working together was to each take responsibility for his or her own part, then it seems safe to surmise that Page’s contributions were greater, as Stone danced supporting roles in this ballet. It is difficult to sort out their individual contributions, and beyond the scope of my study. But although I end by highlighting Page’s choreographic critique of gender, it is not my intention to diminish Stone’s collaborative role in these works.

Tackling prostitution and marriage—both sites of encounter where the boundaries between the sexes have been historically contested—*An American Pattern* and *Frankie and Johnny* presented the stories of women protagonists whose experiences were profoundly defined by constricting social circumstances. In both works, gender is conceived in ideological terms, that is, as a social formation that shapes the individual's life. This conception sharply contrasts the idealization of femininity as innately sensual, sentimental, consumerist, and weak in mid-century modernist ballet criticism, much of it formulated by male theorists at a time when traditional notions of gender were under extreme pressure in the United States.

Further, Page's critical examination of sex roles and the social order in these ballets was intimately wed to the representational choreographic methods she employed. Techniques such as narrative, psychological characterization, and emotional appeal provided overt connections with particular social and cultural circumstances that were rendered opaque once ballet was redefined as a classical "end in itself, [whose] only purpose [was] to create the impression of intensity and beauty."^{*}

In their confrontations with intersecting issues of gender, sexual-economic exchange, and commodification, these ballets point to what art historian Griselda Pollock has articulated as aesthetic "inscriptions of the feminine." Pollock distinguishes between a socio-ideological understanding of "feminine" as a system of prescribed norms (widely rejected by American feminists) and, drawing on Julia Kristeva, a philosophical *le féminin* that stands for not only that which remains unknown in patriarchal structures of meaning, but also a tradition of "material, semiotic, and creative dissidence," already inscribed into history by women artists who have long been "*working* within the predicament of femininity in phallogentric cultures."⁷⁶ Pollock argues that this notion of the feminine is a productive way to reenvision art history through a feminist lens.

For Pollock, a feminine aesthetic is that which intervenes in existing cultural formations, negotiates structures of difference and representation, and reveals the limits and inadequacies of modern culture.⁷⁷ It was one thing for choreographers to reject ballet as a patriarchal system, as many of modern dance's women famously did. But it was quite another choice for a choreographer to deliberately and strategically engage ballet's gendered vocabulary, discourses, and history. More of Page's work needs to be studied; however, as we search for women's ballet choreography, perhaps

* George Balanchine, "Notes on Choreography," *Dance Index*, vol. 4, nos. 2–3 (February–March 1945): 23. In the idea that objectivist modernism made it more difficult for women to express a critical perspective on the social order, I am paraphrasing Suzanne Clark, *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 24.

these dances open a window onto something we might consider as a distinctively feminine choreographic tradition, not in the stereotypical terms of modernist critical discourses, but rather as a socially positioned and invested way of engaging the world through choreographic practice. Here lies an opportunity to understand women's work in ballet not *as* difference, but *in* difference, or rather, in dialogue with a historically and culturally persistent system of difference and opposition. Yet it is an opportunity that has been marginalized—or worse, historicized as second rate—by the ghosts of an exclusionary critical discourse that continue to haunt our archives.

NOTES

1. Marcia B. Siegel, *The Shapes of Change: Images of American Dance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 110.
2. Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick, *No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 134.
3. Susan Bennett, "Theatre History, Historiography, and Women's Dramatic Writing," in *Women, Theatre, and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies*, ed. Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000), 52, 53.
4. Walter L. Adamson, *Embattled Avant-Gardes: Modernism's Resistance to Commodity Culture in Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 19.
5. Lynn Garafola, *Legacies of Twentieth-Century Dance* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 391.
6. Andrea Harris, "Choreographing America: Re-defining 'American' Ballet in the Age of Consensus," in *Interrogating America through Theatre and Performance*, ed. Iris Smith Fischer and William D. Demastes (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 139–55.
7. From an extensive body of scholarship some examples are Christine Battersby, "Stages on Kant's Way: Aesthetics, Morality, and the Gendered Sublime," in *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*, ed. Peggy Zeglin Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 88–114; Bennett, "Theatre History," 46–59; Suzanne Clark, *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," in his *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 44–62; Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen, 1987); and Janet Wolff, *AngloModern: Painting and Modernity in Britain and the United States* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003).
8. John Martin, "The Dance: Native Blend," *New York Times*, March 8, 1936, X8.
9. John Martin, *America Dancing* (1936; reprint Brooklyn, N.Y.: Dance Horizons, 1968), 93, 92.
10. *Ibid.*, 103, 105.
11. John Martin, *Ruth Page: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Marcel Dekker, Inc., 1977), 13, 14.
12. Lynne Conner, *Spreading the Gospel of the Modern Dance: Newspaper Dance Criticism in the United States, 1850–1934* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 109.
13. Douglas Dunn, quoted in Margaret Fuhrer, "Edwin Denby: Iconic American Dance Critic," March 15, 2010, *Dance Teacher*, <http://www.dance-teacher.com/content/edwin-denby>.
14. John Martin, "The Dance: Abstraction," *New York Times*, December 11, 1938, 196.
15. John Martin, "The Dance: Being Bullied," *New York Times*, January 15, 1939, X8.
16. John Martin, "The Dance: Hybrid Art," *New York Times*, February 12, 1939, 136.
17. Joellen Meglin, "Blurring the Boundaries of Genre, Gender, and Geopolitics: Ruth Page and Harald Kreutzberg's Transatlantic Collaboration in the 1930s," *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2009): 53. See also Mark Franko, *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 107.
18. Martin, *America Dancing*, 67.
19. *Ibid.*, 72–74.

20. Ibid., 81.
21. John Martin, *Introduction to the Dance* (1939; reprint Brooklyn, N.Y.: Dance Horizons, 1965), 208.
22. Gay Morris, *A Game for Dancers: Performing Modernism in the Postwar Years, 1945–1960* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 44.
23. Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” [1939], in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Frascina, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 50; Martin, *Introduction*, 53.
24. Martin, *America Dancing*, 91, 92.
25. Martin, “The Dance: Abstraction.”
26. Martin, “The Dance: Hybrid Art.”
27. Martin, *Introduction*, 123, 123, 122.
28. Ibid., 217, 211, 210, 124.
29. Ibid., 216.
30. Franko, *The Work of Dance*, 107.
31. See Sally Banes, “Sibling Rivalry: The New York City Ballet and Modern Dance,” in *Dance For a City: Fifty Years of the New York City Ballet*, ed. Lynn Garafola with Eric Foner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 73–98.
32. Lincoln Kirstein, *Ballet Alphabet* [1939], in *Ballet: Bias and Belief: Three Pamphlets Collected and Other Dance Writings of Lincoln Kirstein*, compiled by Nancy Reynolds (New York: Dance Horizons, 1983), 312.
33. George Balanchine, “Notes on Choreography,” *Dance Index*, vol. 4, nos. 2–3 (February–March 1945): 23.
34. Edwin Denby, “Balanchine’s ‘Apollon’; American Ballet Caravan” [1938], in *Dance Writings*, ed. Robert Cornfield and William Mackay (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 47.
35. Edwin Denby, “Balanchine’s American Ballet” [1937], in Cornfield and Mackay, *Dance Writings*, 45.
36. Edwin Denby, “A Note on Balanchine’s Present Style” [1945], in Cornfield and Mackay, *Dance Writings*, 413.
37. Lincoln Kirstein, *What Ballet Is About: An American Glossary* [1959], in *Ballet: Bias and Belief*, 378, 375.
38. Ibid., 376, 417, 383, 377, 374.
39. Ibid., 434.
40. See, for example, Battersby, “Stages on Kant’s Way”; David Levin, “Race under Representation,” *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 13, no. 1–2 (1991): 62–94; and Schor, *Reading in Detail*. For an account of the sublime and neoclassical ballet, see David Michael Levin, “Balanchine’s Formalism” [1973], in *What Is Dance?*, ed. Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 123–45.
41. Lincoln Kirstein, “Alec: Or the Future of Choreography” [1953], in *Ballet: Bias and Belief*, 98.
42. Ibid., 101, 103; 101; 98,100.
43. Joan Wallace Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 55.
44. Ibid., 63.
45. Edwin Denby, “A Briefing in American Ballet” [1948], in Cornfield and Mackay, *Dance Writings*, 522.
46. Ibid., 523.
47. Kirstein, *What Ballet Is About*, in *Ballet*, 376
48. Denby, “A Note,” in Cornfield and Mackay, *Dance Writings*, 412.
49. Edwin Denby, “A Letter on New York City Ballet” [1952], in Cornfield and Mackay, *Dance Writings*, 421, 422.
50. Ibid., 420.
51. Edwin Denby, “In the Abstract” [1959–1960], in Cornfield and Mackay, *Dance Writings*, 467.
52. George Amberg, *Ballet in America: The Emergence of an American Art* (New York: Mentor Books, 1949), 127.
53. Edwin Denby, “Some Thoughts about Classicism and George Balanchine” [1953], in Cornfield and Mackay, *Dance Writings*, 438, 422.
54. Denby, “A Letter,” 422, 435.
55. Ibid., 422. On American ballet and postwar consensus culture, see Harris, “Choreographing America.”

56. Lincoln Kirstein, "Classic Ballet: Aria of the Aerial" [1976], in *Ballet: Bias and Belief*, 131.
57. Denby, "The Monte Carlo Distracted" [1946], in Cornfield and Mackay, *Dance Writings*, 347, 348.
58. Edwin Denby, "Ballet: The American Position" [1947], in Cornfield and Mackay, *Dance Writings*, 512.
59. Denby, "A Letter," 428, 429.
60. *Ibid.*, 428.
61. Edwin Denby, "On Meaning in Dance" [1943], in Cornfield and Mackay, *Dance Writings*, 131.
62. Denby, "Ballet: The American Position," 512, 524.
63. Denby, "A Letter," 429.
64. Edwin Denby, "Fokine's 'Russian Soldier'; Tudor's 'Pillar of Fire'; Balanchine's Elephant Ballet" [1942], in Cornfield and Mackay, *Dance Writings*, 93.
65. Edwin Denby, "Massine and the New Monte Carlo" [1938], in Cornfield and Mackay, *Dance Writings*, 53.
66. Denby, "A Letter," 422; "A Note," 414.
67. Scott, *Gender*, 10.
68. Martin, *Ruth Page*, 14, 13.
69. *Ibid.*, 15, 14, 13–14, 13.
70. "Federal Ballet Presents" [poster], Federal Theatre Project, Vassar Collection of Programs and Promotional Material, Jericho-PA folder, Box 159, National Archives, Records of the Works Projects Administration. Also http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/new_deal_for_the_arts/images/celebrating_the_people/federal_ballet.html (accessed October 24, 2011).
71. On Page's political engagement during the Federal Ballet period, see Cooper, "Dances About Spain," 232–39. On Page's previous choreographic explorations of gender, see Meglin, "Blurring the Boundaries."
72. Meglin, "Blurring the Boundaries," 54–63.
73. This and the following three quotations are all from Ruth Page, *An American Pattern* [scenario], folder M30, Ruth Page Collection, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
74. Emily Rosenberg, "Consuming Women: Images of Americanization in the 'American Century,'" *Diplomatic History*, vol. 23, no. 3 (1999): 481.
75. Wolff, *AngloModern*, 87. For a similar perspective, see Bennett, "Theatre History," 53, and Clark, *Sentimental Modernism*, 202.
76. Griselda Pollock, "Moments of Temporality of the Avant-Garde 'in, of, and from the feminine,'" *New Literary History*, vol. 41, no. 4 (2010): 802, and *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 33.
77. In addition to the above-cited works, see also Griselda Pollock, "Inscriptions in the Feminine," in *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of, and from the feminine*, ed. M. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1995), 67–87.