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Introduction

Feminist Modernist Dance, Part II

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In late July of 1959 Chicago dance writer Ann Barzel went to Cuba. The successful revolution led by Fidel Castro to overthrow the military dictatorship of Cuban president Fulgencio Batista had happened a little over six months earlier, and relations with the United States, while not comfortable, were still imaginable. Barzel came at the invitation of her friends, the ballet dancers Alicia and Fernando Alonso, to act as a member of the selection board for auditions for the Ballet Alicia Alonso. Founded in 1948, Ballet Alicia Alonso was Cuba's first professional ballet company (it would later become the Ballet Nacional de Cuba). It barely survived the Batista years, but with the support of Castro, it benefitted greatly from the revolution, receiving what dance historian Elizabeth Schwall describes as "hearty new government subsidies" as part of a revolutionary project dedicated to fostering the growth of the arts in Cuba.¹ Barzel joined expatriate Ukrainian dancer and Alonso dance partner Igor Youskevitch as one of the few American representatives on the panel, and Schwall argues she was treated with reverence during her visit, as "one of the outstanding people in the ballet world." While not a professional dancer herself, Barzel had translated her early dance training and expertise into a powerful career as a dance reviewer and historian, advocating for and shaping the trajectory of dance in the twentieth century, especially ballet. Her presence at this historic audition—that the audition itself was considered newsworthy—demonstrates the significance of dance as part of global geopolitical

history and reminds us that those who influence dance are not always performers and choreographers, that those who document dance influence our understanding of it.

The essays in this issue similarly make visible the women who shaped dance through documentation—whether through documenting and archiving their own dance practices, creating dance performances that preserve cultural stories, or writing that theorizes dance or draws on it as a metaphor for bodily agency. Genevieve Stebbins wrote instruction manuals on aesthetic dance practices as she circulated and expanded the foundation of what became modern dance; Emily Holmes Coleman presaged the manifestation of state control over female bodies—particularly those deemed “mad”—during the rise of fascism of the 1930s through her main character’s dancing in her surrealist novel *The Shutter of Snow*; Barbara Mary Beck, who performed under the stage name of Conchita Triana left behind an archive through which we can explore Canadian flamenco dance within the context of settler colonialism; Zora Neale Hurston wrote and directed a theatrical revue based on folk song and dances collected during her ethnographic research in the American South; and Barzel meticulously and lovingly curated an archive of dance ephemera—from programs to pointe shoes—and reporting from her long career.

Like the first special issue on Feminist Modernist Dance Studies, published in 2021, these essays cover the late nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries, and focus on the recuperation of women who influenced modernism through dance. This issue, however, stretches both the geographic and conceptual borders of modernism, looking at performance (or imagined performances) from Paris to Canada to New York City, African and African American vernacular in North America, and the circulation of dance writing internationally. The essays proceed roughly chronologically.

The issue opens with Kelly Jean Lynch's "Aesthetic Dance as Woman's Culture in America at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: Genevieve Stebbins and the New York School of Expression," which introduces readers to American aesthetic dance practices of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that lay the foundation for modern dance. She clarifies the ways that women participated in and promoted aesthetic dance, especially through the figure of Genevieve Stebbins, the foremost advocate, educator, and innovator of American Delsartism. Lynch argues that while aesthetic dance has often been cast as the purview of private performance and patrons' salons, it actually enjoyed widespread public attention through its systemic instruction at Stebbins' New York School of Expression, as well as through being featured in theatrical performances and women's clubs. Lynch asks us to pay attention to aesthetic dance's broader publics in order to better understand the trajectory of American modern dance.

Kimberly Coates draws connections between literary representations of dance and historical dance performance in "Audacious Limbs: Dance as Revolutionary Praxis in Emily Holmes Coleman's Surrealist Novel, *The Shutter of Snow*." Her essay, opening with an account of surrealist dancer, sculptor and painter H el ene Vanel (1908-1999) performing at the 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris, reads surrealist dance as revolutionary praxis, an alternative to the oppression of the rising tide of fascism throughout Europe. Coates posits Coleman's novel, written a decade earlier, as prescient in its focus on the revolutionary potential of women dancing as a challenge to the containment of women's bodies and minds by the state.

For Emily Murphy and Katherine McLeod, the figure of the dancing woman becomes a site at which shifting definitions of the state emerge. Through archival and movement analysis of the career of Canada's first professional flamenco dancer Barbara Mary Beck (1912-2006), who

performed under the stage name of Conchita Triana, they argue for a reconsideration of the history and significance of flamenco dance in Canada. “‘The lissome lady from Spain’: Building Canadian Modernism and Flamenco Dance in Performance Archives,” revises contemporary understandings of flamenco dance as associated with the multiculturalist policies of the 1970s and an influx of late-Francoist Spanish immigration to Canada, pointing to the career of Beck/Triana as evidence of an earlier cultural fascination with the “incongruity” of exotic Spanish dance flourishing in the cold north. Murphy and McLeod draw on their own expertise as flamenco practitioners and long-time collaborators to argue that “flamenco dance reveals how white, settler-Canadian identity constructed communities of practice around an imagined Spain.” A hand-tinted photograph of Beck/Triana appears on this issue’s cover, its archival traces—the punched hole at the center top, the worn corners, the slight streak of discoloration—inviting curiosity and speculation. Was this saved by an admirer? A proud family member? Beck/Triana herself?

Rebecca Nicholson Weir’s essay, “Dancing and *Singing Steel*: Zora Neale Hurston in Chicago,” similarly considers the role of dance in producing cultural narratives of identity and belonging. In her discussion of Hurston’s 1934 stage revue, *Singing Steel*, performed in Chicago in December of that year, Weir draws on the rich, but usually overlooked archival presence of the show in Hurston’s papers to insist on the importance of this moment in her career and the continuity between this work as a stage writer and director to her more commonly known work as a novelist, essayist, and anthropologist. Through popular lectures and academic talks around Chicago in support of the concert, Hurston made connections that would shape the rest of her career. Weir’s essay argues for the pedagogical importance of these lectures, as well as the performance itself, with its accompanying annotated program, all based in Hurston’s

ethnographic fieldwork. *Singing Steel* tells the story of a day in the life of workers and families in a railroad camp in the deep South, rejecting folksy caricatures of African American laborers in order to offer sophisticated variations on folk themes and forms that educate her Northern audience about their historical geneses.

This issue closes with “Voice from the Wings: Ann Barzel and Twentieth-Century Dance Writing,” by Jessica Ray Herzogenrath, which continues this discussion of the pedagogical work of dance and dance criticism. In recovering the work of Barzel, whose publications span over seven decades, Herzogenrath argues that from her home base in Chicago she changed the landscape of dance in the United States. She looks at the genesis of Barzel’s writing career, her work for both specialized dance publications and newspapers, and her correspondence with some of the dance world’s most prominent figures. Additionally, Herzogenrath encourages readers to see Barzel as a tireless advocate for dance who used her writing to turn the spotlight on other dancers and choreographers rather than on herself.

Each essay offers different ways to consider how documenting dance has impacted the trajectories of various embodied practices, as well as our understanding of them. Although it may seem that the acceleration of the availability of dance on film after World War II would supplant the written word, the traces of dance on the page remain one of the primary ways that we encounter it. Barzel continued to write about dance into the twenty-first century, and her archives at the Newberry Library—over 400 boxes of materials on dance amassed over her lifetime—have become a requisite pilgrimage for those writing about twentieth century dance. We have only begun to explore the richness of Barzel’s archive and of the many dance archives represented in this issue. Without the voices of the women who documented dance in their own

ways and on their own terms, we miss important instantiations of dance as central to modernist aesthetics and of women as modernist innovators and artists.

Notes

¹ The account of Barzel in Cuba comes from Elizabeth Schwall's talk, "Dancing Between Havana and Chicago: Collaborating Across Political Divides, 1959-2019," at the Newberry Library, Chicago, IL, May 17, 2019.

Bibliography

Elizabeth Schwall, "Dancing Between Havana and Chicago: Collaborating Across Political Divides, 1959-2019," Symposium on Dance in the Midwest, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois, May 17, 2019. <https://soundcloud.com/newberrylibrary/midwest-dance-symposium-session-2>.