Dancing Out the Difference: Cultural Imperialism and Ruth St. Denis's Radha of 1906

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Introduction

An analysis of the mechanisms through which meaning is generated is central to any re-evaluation of dance history and its canon. I will be arguing in this essay for the application of poststructuralist theory to the writing of dance history and also for the wider opening of feminist scholarship to considerations of live performance. Women's studies, although it has generated a great deal of scholarly writing on the social construction of gender and the visual and verbal representation of women in literature, visual arts, and the mass media, has yet to engage fully with the specific richness of performance. Study of performance can include not only historical analysis of visual representations, their construction and reception, but also consideration of the special case of construction of meaning through display of the body—a body that is at once "real" and "representational" as it exists in performance. If "the feminine" itself can be conceived of as a socially constituted masquerade, as Mary Ann Doane and others have noted, then an analysis of performance has wide potential application for work in feminist studies.

Dance Spectacle

Although dance scholarship has expanded dramatically in the last fifteen years or so, it remains far behind related fields of arts criticism both in the amount of work and in the level of analysis. Within the bounds of traditional history and criticism, several excellent scholars have emerged in the last two decades, but the discipline as a whole is still a minefield for acceptance within the academy and remains relatively closed to current work in related fields such as literary theory. There are many reasons for this, but the most evident is perhaps the way in which dance, with its closest connection to movement, improvisation, and the body, has been marginalized by the discipline of dance itself. Most dance writing is still concerned with technical and artistic judgment, historical reconstruction, portraiture, and description, or even social history; but deeper analyses of the ideological functions of dances as works of art are still relatively rare. Only in the last few years have dance critics and historians begun to consider issues that have engaged literary critics and feminist scholars for much more than a decade. Gender, while it may be noted, is rarely analyzed as a constitutive factor.

Furthermore, we are still in the early stages of developing theoretical tools suitable for our object of investigation: the human body, most often the female body, moving in performance. I want to show how theoretical tools drawn from other disciplines can be adapted to dance criticism, as well as how any investigation of gender in dance must be linked to concurrent analysis of other markers of cultural otherness, such as race and class. I hope that in return the particular structure of dance as live performance will open new avenues of theoretical investigation, furthering development of current theories about perception, pleasure, and the mapping of meaning onto the gendered body.

Ruth St. Denis

My object of analysis is an important 1906 piece, Radha, choreographed and performed by Ruth St. Denis. St. Denis is usually presented as one of the major figures in the history of American dance, and she is always cited, along with Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan, as one of the three "mothers" of modern dance. Any re-evaluation of the dance history canon must consider St. Denis's work.

With her husband, Ted Shawn, she started the Denishawn school of dance, one of the first professional schools of "aesthetic" dancing, in 1915, and toured throughout the country in the early decades of this century. Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and Martha Graham, the leading choreographers of the next generation, all served an apprenticeship with Denishawn. St. Denis's work was seen on the vaudeville circuit (often the first professional aesthetic dancing that many Americans encountered) and was performed in elite theaters as well. The bulk of her repertoire, which she continued to perform well into the 1960s, consisted of dances inspired by ethnic styles ranging from American Indian to Japanese. The scale of the works varied from solo pieces to large spectacles. Denishawn dancers even appeared in D. W. Griffith's 1916 film, Intolerance. In the 1920s St. Denis's company toured Europe, presenting its orientalism to enthusiastic crowds. Although St. Denis's aesthetic was largely rejected as too decorative by Humphrey and Graham, and her works are not regularly performed today, her contribution to the rise of modern dance in America cannot be denied.

Most dance histories discuss St. Denis's "showmanship" and refer to her dances as part of the turn-of-the-century American passion for exoticism. But such observations do not take us deeply into the ideological structure and function of the work itself. While we can never imagine with certainty the meaning of an art work for a particular audience, we can venture an analysis of its structures of meaning. I will argue that by adapting contemporary insights drawn from literary criticism, film theory, and work on race and colonialism, we can come closer to understanding not only what Radha means, but how its range of meanings may be produced. I will argue that Radha presents a hyperbolization of categories of otherness, mapping markers of race, orientalism, and sexuality onto the white middle-class female body. Thus, Radha can be said to function as a site of condemnation and displacement of desire.

Radha

Spectacle

The dance opens and closes with visions of the Hindu goddess Radha poised in spiritual contemplation, paradisical hidden by a screen. The longest portion of the dance, however, consists of five variations celebrating the pleasures of the senses, and a whirling "delirium of the senses" episode that plunges the dancer into postorgasmic darkness. In both its theatrical structure and its visual arrangement on the stage, Radha is a spectacle displaying the female body.

It is spectacular first in the sense of not being narrative. Although there is a thin story line to the dance, and it fits the barest requirements of narrative—stasis, disruption, stasis—the majority of stage time is devoted to the display of the body in a way that does not drive a narrative forward by providing new information or character development. Second, the spectacular aspects of the dance are enhanced by an emphasis on surface decoration. The stage is set with soft amber lighting, wisps of incense, and the ornate backdrop (or—in a later version—a stage set) representing a Jain temple. St. Denis's costume, a short jacket and gauzy skirt, is accented with "jewels" and trimmed with shiny material. Flowers adorn her hair and jewelry her ankles and arms. Midi and feet are bare. That a critic for
Variety referred to the "semi-nudity of the woman" tells us how this consuming was perceived at the time.

The choreography itself reiterated the decorative aspect of the design. As Suzanne Shefton notes, St. Denis believed that "each gesture and pose should objectify an inner emotional state," and Radha was conceived as "an elaborate network of spatial and gestural symbols" connoting such feeling states as rapture, despair, or inspiration.8 Authorial intent aside, Radha—having been blocked out with saltcellars on the kitchen table—was a series of simple circular or square spatial patterns composed of relatively simple movements.

These movements were the turns and flounces of the skirt dancer's repertoire mixed with a smattering of balletic steps and Delsartean limb movements. Never having studied Indian dance, St. Denis drew on the images of India available to her in books and punctuated her simple phrases with poses that recalled oriental icons and "popular images of the late Victorian era," such as the femme fatale.9 Many of these poses were performed in profile, enhancing the two-dimensional quality of the figure-ground relationship. Radha, brought out of her ornate enclosure like a precious jewel, becomes a moving ornament against an elaborately decorated backdrop until, after displaying her valuable beauty, she is enclosed again, still tantalizingly visible but unattainable, within the carved fretwork of her diadem. Every aspect of staging can be seen as contributing to this fetishistic display. A closer look at the choreography will clarify the presentation.

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Description and Close Analysis

The curtain rises to reveal the goddess Radha sitting in the lotus position on a pedestal.10 (In later versions she is partially hidden from view behind an ornately carved screen, which will be opened by the head priest.) A procession of Brahman priests enters, carrying sacrificial offerings. (The priests were performed by Indian sailors and clerks ranked up for the purpose.)11 When the priests are seated in a semicircle, framing a space for Radha to enter, she comes to life. Watching by her priests, she enters the sacred space to begin the dance of the five senses. In a progression from the senses of far distance to the more intimate ones (taste and touch), Radha dances to music from Delibes's orientalist opera, Lakme.

In the opening dance of sight, Radha holds a strand of pearls in each hand as she revolves in place. Then, in small steps phrased to the music, she moves from side to side in front of her watching priests, posing occasionally with one leg gently lifted to the front. Exchanging the pearls for bells, she begins the playful, rhythmic dance of hearing during which she surrounds her body with a cascade of sounds. Throbhing music initiates the dance of smell as Radha manipulates a garland of marigolds in a series of simple waltzing steps and poses. At the close of the section she arches back, trailing the blossoms along the front of her body, one hand crushing the flowers to her face. So far we have seen the dancer's body in association with nature and signs of luxurious ornamentation.

Things heat up for the dance of taste, which follows. Drinking deeply from a simple clay bowl, she whirls with abandon, ending in the seductive vulnerability of a deep back bend before she falls to the ground. Kneeling, with her skirt spread around her, she starts the dance of touch by caressing one hand with the other. Languorous music accompanies her movements as she slides her hands voluptuously over her body, ending with fingertips to her lips.

After the "foreplay" of the preceding episodes, the "delirium of the senses" section unfolds, the music quickening to a frenzied tempo. Spinning, possessed, Radha whirls with her skirts swishing wildly until she suddenly falls to the ground, and "wishes and trembles to a climax, then lies supine as darkness descends."12 The lights come up on a chastened Radha, lifting her arms in supplication. After trac ing the petals of a lotus blossom on the floor, she withdraws to her shrine. The final image shows her sitting on her pedestal, transformed by samadhi, self-realization.

Aesthetic Dancing

St. Denis's aesthetic dancing arose during a time of complex social change in America. At the turn of the twentieth century, changing gender roles joined with racial and ethnic differences and class antagonisms to create a volatile social mixture.13 To contextualize St. Denis's work, I will consider two aspects of turn-of-the-century culture: changing social attitudes toward the body, and popularization of the "exotic" in cultural forms.

American Delsarte Movement

In the later decades of the nineteenth century, a growing emphasis on "physical culture" was allied with a number of reform and educational movements, such as women's dress reform and physical education.14 Prominent among these physical training regimes was the American Delsarte movement, based on the teachings of French music and drama teacher François Delsarte (1811–1871). Seeking to analyze and classify human expression, he developed a technical training system based on "an elaborate and mystical science of aesthetics deriving from his personal interpretation of the Christian Trinity."15 In the Delsarte system, the codification of gesture was linked to "a spiritual labeling of every part of the body according to certain zones—Head, Heart, and Lower Limbs, which corresponded to Mind, Soul, Life."16

Although intended for the elocutionary training of professional speakers and actors in the 1870s, the expressive principles of Delsarte's aesthetic theory were
being practiced throughout the United States by the late 1880s, especially by women, in the drawing rooms of middle- and upper-class households. American proponents of Delaistasm stressed relaxation techniques, "energizing" exercises, rhythmic gymnastics, "natural" movement based on spiralling curves, statue-poising, and pantomime. Statue-poising and pantomime were deemed "the ultimate in refinement and gentility" and helped open a "wedge for the entrance of respectable women into the field of theatrical dance" at a time when the theater was regarded in the United States as morally suspect.17

Through Delarte, movement was analyzed and linked to meaning and morality. "Natural" movement was thought to provide authenticity of expression. The body became a signifier of Truth. Writing in 1914 about the Delarte system, Ted Shaw, St. Denis's lifelong partner, states, "The spontaneous movements of the body cannot lie... all human beings move under the government of universal laws, and gesture is the universal language by which we can speak to each other with immediacy, clarity, and truth, and which no barrier of race, nationality, language, religion or political belief can diminish in communicative power."18

The changes in American society at the turn of the century coincided with massive colonial expansion in which Europe consolidated control of most of what is now known as the Third World. During this time, a popular and elite fascination with non-European cultures coincided with a rise in such "sciences" of codification as ethnography. The "exotic" was extremely fashionable in scholarly endeavors as well as "high" art and "low" art forms. In some high art contexts, the exotic was cast as a utopian vision of the past glories of classical civilizations. The past seemed to offer an antidote to the chaotic urban conditions that threatened the middle and upper classes. At the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition, the monumental White City, built in neo-classical style, typified this urge in elite cultural production.19 Popular images of the exotic, however, were less utopian and were perceived by the cultural elite as merely gratifying the senses rather than providing spiritual uplift. For example, historian John Kasson describes the exposition's Midway as "exuberant chaos," and a "hurly-burly of exotic attractions: mosques and pagodas, Viennese streets and Turkish bazaars, South Sea Island huts, Irish and German castles, and Indian tepees."20 A prime attraction was the Persian Palace of Eros where Little Egypt and her cohorts danced the hootchy-koochy. Described at the time as a "suggestively lascivious contorting of the abdominal muscles" that was "almost shockingly disgusting," this attraction proved immensely popular.21

Exotic popular amusements like the Midway and Luna Park on Coney Island, which attracted both middle- and working-class patrons, supplied an ornate aesthetic that Kasson has termed the "oriental organic." The essential strains of Delartram and orientalism mixed well. St. Denis's achievement in Radha was to combine the oriental organic with Delart's transcendent spirituality into a spectacular form that could play successfully not only on the vaudeville circuit but also at the garden parties of the elite and in the art theaters of America and Europe.

Ruth St. Denis and Radha

The multiple strains of orientalism, popular culture, and artistic spiritualism that are found in St. Denis's work have their beginnings in her childhood. The daughter of a well-educated progressive mother, she was drilled in Delarte exercises and exposed to Eastern spiritualism through theosophy and through the orientalist performance of leading American Delarte exponent Genevieve Steblins. As a young adult, St. Denis became a believer in Christian Science, and throughout her career she combined the spirituality of the Delarte system with her own adaptations of Christian Science teachings, which emphasized that "spirit is the immortal truth; matter is mortal error."22

Some scholars have seen a feminist dimension in Christian Science, founded by Mary Baker Eddy, because it asserts the androgynous nature of God. In the social sphere, this concept means that in order to be complete persons, both men and women had to have "a harmonious balance of masculine and feminine train.23 But equally important to Christian Science were notions of morality that promoted "purity" and "chastity.24 Inheriting the traditional Christian dualism between the spiritual and material realms, Christian Science did away with the hierarchy of that dualism by denying the material world altogether, subsuming it into a monism of Spirit. As Susan Hill Lindley has argued, the feminism of Christian Science was "ambiguous," and Eddy's resolution of this dualism that traditionally denigrated both women and the material "was no real solution to the tension, for it denied rather than redeemed the 'lost half.'25"

But, the spiritualism of Christian Science combined with the Delarte system, which allowed women a new freedom of expression through movement, may have provided St. Denis a way "around" the strictures associated with the body's materiality and sensuality. While building a career on her own physical display, she steadfastly asserted her identity as a mystic and her dancing as spiritual uplift. In a poem titled "White Jade" describing an early dance of the same name, St. Denis writes, "My own body is the living Temple of all Gods. The God of Truth is in my upright spine. The God of Love is in the Heart's rhythmic beating. The God of Wisdom lives in my conceiving mind... The God of Beauty is revealed in my harmonious body."26 In this rhetorical fact, the material body is not so much denied as transposed into the figure of transcendental values.

Through her dance, St. Denis declared that she was presenting the mystic's experience of unity with God. In preparation for each performance of Radha, St. Denis wrote, she would meditate for half an hour to "realize my contact with the one Mind... so that by the time she stepped onstage, she felt she was truly the priestess in the temple.27"

Just as in Christian Science the body was subsumed into Spirit, St. Denis subsumed the sensual aspects of her dancing into a vaunted mysticism framed both as religion and as art. In doing so she, like her contemporaries Isadora Duncan, was able to extend the bounds of propriety in the public display of the partially clothed female body. At a time when bare feet were cause for shock, St. Denis in her revealing costume earned reviews declaring, "Every lascivious thought flies shy into the farthest corner..."28 She has freed our souls from the clutches of everyday life.29

St. Denis's dancing was not always so uplifting. With the support of her mother, who accompanied her to New York, she got her start at the age of fifteen as a skirt dancer in a dime museum variety show. Surrounded by specimens like triple-headed calves, she danced six shows a day, punctuating her routines with acrobatic roll-overs and her specialty, the slow-splits. On the bill with St. Denis one week in 1894 was an albino musician and Lillie the Trick Dog. This may not seem an auspicious start for a dancer who was later to be hailed as the solution to "the world's enigma," but it provided the basis for an artistic savvy that "aspired to the loftier echelons of fine art" while never losing the "genius of lowbrow."30

The myth surrounding St. Denis's first moment of choreographic revelation combines mass consumer culture with the spiritual aspirations assigned to high art. In 1904, while on tour in a David Belasco production of Dulcinea, St. Denis was struck by a drugstore poster advertising Egyptian Deities cigarettes: the bare-breasted goddesses his art surrounded by huge columns and flowering lilies. An inscription carved in stone above her head assured the buyer that "No Better Turkish Cigarette Can Be Made." St. Denis later wrote, "My destiny as a dancer had sprung alive in that moment. I would become a rhythmic and impersonal instrument of spiritual revelation... I have never before known such an inward shock of rapture."31

In dance histories, this incident is usually repeated and valorized as a moment of artistic inspiration. What should be noted, however, is how it reveals the forces of commodification, appropriation of the exotic, rapacious denial of the physical in favor of the spiritual, and display of the female body as a site of revelation that
were to mark St. Denis's work throughout her career. All of these are exemplified in *Radha*.

The dance (Egipps) that the poster inspired was not completed until several years later, but the idea of an Eastern goddess was transposed into an Indian setting for *Radha*, which catapulted St. Denis into the artistic circles of the cultural elite. First publicly performed in 1906, *Radha* played in New York at Proctor's vaudeville house on Twenty-third Street, with St. Denis appearing between acts by a pupilist and a group of trained monkeys. Soon, however, a New York socialist and orientalist enthusiast, Mrs. Orland Rowland, took an interest in St. Denis's work and arranged a private matinee for her society friends. *Radha* became a hit. Newspaper notices assured her success with headlines such as "Yes, Society Did Gap What! "Radha Is Incense-Laden Air." *The New York Times* reviewed the performance, noting that "the spectacle turned away from usual performance,...St. Denis was launched on the high art circuit and soon found an influential supporter in Stanford White, but her work never lost its cross-class appeal. Lean times periodically sent her back to vaudeville to finance her work.

By thus contextualizing *Radha* in terms of the popular culture of the time, the rise of "barefoot dancing," and various strains of spiritualism, I have touched on issues of gender, orientalism, and changing representations of women. Many dance historians stop their analysis at this point. But I still want to consider in detail the ideologies of these various discourses and their mode of activation in the construction of *Radha*.

**"Orientalism"**

Edward Said defines "orientalism" as "a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')." Through an act of "imaginative geography," it both created and then served the maintenance of the two worlds. It articulates a "relationship of power, of domination, and of varying degrees of cultural hegemony."* Orientalism* in Said's usage refers not only to the changing political-cultural relations between Europe and Asia but also to the discovery and study of various oriental cultures by Westerners and to a body of assumptions, images, and fantasies held by Westerners about the Orient. It is this latter category that is my concern here. Although Said traces historical changes in the specific constitution of these images and fantasies, he maintains that a pervasive "latent Orientalism," circulating both inside and outside of scholarly disciplines, has remained remarkably consistent for several hundred years.

Above all, the Orient is conceived of as unchanging and eternal. Occasionally these characteristics are valorized as "semital" and "profund," as in reference to "the wisdom of the East." Yet, most of the attributes assigned to the Orient are opposite to those valorized in the West. The East is primitive, childlike, and backward; it is eccentric, irrational, chaotic, and mysterious; it is sensual, sexual, secular, and despotic. Most important, the Orient is deemed incapable of speaking for itself. It is not Europe's "interlocutor, but its silent Other." The Western orientalist, as artist or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the East was clearly constructed as a site requiring explanation, investigation, illustration, discipline, reconstruction, or redemption. The East's otherness offended European standards of sexual propriety, threatened domestic seamliness, and "wore away Eastern discreetness and rationality of time, space, and personal identity. In the Orient, one was suddenly confronted with unimaginable antiquity, inhuman beauty, boundless distance."

By the last decades of the nineteenth century, the "unchanging" nature of the East was seen as a source of regeneration for a Western world caught in an unsettling rise of industrialism and materialism. Said has characterized this idea of regeneration as a secular post-Enlightenment myth based on Christian imagery of death and rebirth through salvation. In *Radha*, St.

Denis acts out a similar scenario of redemption within the imaginative geography of the Orient. Following Said, we could thus look at *Radha*, with its cresting tide of physical excitement overcome by spiritual purification, as illustrating the threatened chaotic sensuality of the East and its ultimate discipline and redemption through the triumph of spirituality or the law of ultimate truth. From this point of view, *Radha* projects a vision of the East as a site of imaginary pilgrimage both for sexual indulgence and physical awakening, the same notion later popularized in E. M. Forster's *Passage to India* and for spiritual rejuvenation of an America in the throes of change.

But if *Radha* is "about" the East, it is even more about the West. As James Clifford has noted in his criticism of Said's book, Said's argument at times suffers too much from the dichotomy we/they he attempts to describe. In fact, Western discourse about "the East" reflects a continually changing historical process of self-definition by "the West." We can see *Radha* as a portrayal of Western desires and ambivalences displaced onto an orientalized, gendered body. The association between the cultural otherness of the Orient and the construction of gender in the West is the key to this linkage.

**Orientalism and the Otherness of Gender and Race**

As a site of unlimited desire and deep generative energies, the Orient is figured as female. Trinh T. Minh-ha describes the construction of the feminine in Western culture in practically the same language Said uses in depicting the Orient. "Woman," she says, "can never be defined... . She wallows in night, disorder, immorality, and is at the same time the 'disturbing factor (between men)' and the key to the beyond." Both *woman* and "the East" are constructed by Western patriarchy as "natural" categories of difference requiring explanation, investigation, illustration, discipline, reconstruction, or redemption. Knowledge of both is eroticized as a stripping bare, an exposing of hidden meaning. The vocabulary itself reveals a scopic economy of difference in which the act of seeing is equated with mastery. As Said notes, a recurrent motif in nineteenth-century writing is the "vision of the Orient as spectacle, or tableau vivant." That both the Orient and woman are cast as speechless renderers self-narrative and history impossible and creates the necessary conditions for visual spectacle as site or source of knowledge. These double specular economies of difference come together in St. Denis's performance of *Radha*. Here the mute colonized female body represents the sensuality of both the "female" and the Orient. Similarly, the higher spirituality attached to the "wisdom of the East" meets current notions of the women's sphere as the province of moral guardianship. *Radha* is thus doubly sexualized and doubly chaste. The tensions between these seemingly incommensurable attributes—godness/breath, Eastern/Western, and sexual/chaste—are all articulated across the material presence of the female body. The dance signals the underlying dialectical relation of opposites in any binary construction. It also points to the changing dimensions of women's roles at the turn of the century and the re-construction of female physicality as it was reflected in the health reform movement.

Freud's description of woman's sexuality as the dark continent reminds us of the intimate relationship among orientalism, gender, and a third register of otherness: race. In discussing this phrase, Sander Gilman asserts that Freud "ties the image of female sexuality to the image of the colonial black and to the perceived relationship between the female's ascribed sexuality and the Other's exoticism and pathology." The reason Freud's statement was legible to his contemporaries is that, like female sexuality and the imaginative geography of colonialism, the "dark races" were represented as objects to be illuminated, mapped, and controlled. Early nineteenth-century race theory joined with social Darwinism in the latter half of the century to provide intellectual currency for white ideas about the biological basis of racial inequality. Like gender, the concept of race entailed notions of difference that were
seen as irredulously linked to the body and, therefore, as "natural." Both women and non-whites were thus con-
signed to the "lower" realm of nature. The same dy-
mamic of dominance based on natural difference that was exemplified in white colonialism also undergirds patriarchy.

Reading Radha

In Radha I find a construction of meaning that de-
pends on manipulating these codes of difference into an overlapping structure: Race, gender, and cultural othersness double one another, with each register rein-
forcing the next to produce a hyperbole of "Other-
ness." Radha, as a nonverbal display of the body—
most often the female body—provides an especially rich mode of articulation for this process.

As I have noted in the preceding discussion, orien-
talist thought has constructed the East as feminine. Racial thinking has similarly tied othersness to the body. Display of the "colored" Eastern female body then carries with it a surplus of signifiers of difference. The litany of difference can be summarized as sexual (i.e., desirable yet terrifying), mute, natural, essential, universal, unchanging, and visually knowable. The fe-
male body is the nodal point that interpolates racial and cultural difference in Radha. Its investigation is also the main content of the dance and the vehicle for spectacle.

Mechanisms of Meaning

The structure of this dance reveals the spectacle of a woman lost in a rising tide of self-pleasure, a goddess delirious with her own sexuality. It shows a woman re-
nouncing, of her own accord, the powerful pleasure of her own body for a chaste spiritual union with the transcendent. It shows the careful marking out and celebration of each aspect of a woman's physicality, her five senses explored one by one moving in sequence, so that the spectator is drawn into an ever more intimate relationship with her body. This spectacle is displayed

in front of a semicircle of male viewers on stage and
equally directed outward to the audience.

When it is described in this way, the scopophilic as-
pects of the piece become apparent. Drawing on psy-
choanalytic film theories of spectatorship and voyeur-
imism, I maintain that the woman's body is fragmented and fetishized, not only visually but conceptually, into each of the five senses—the woman is the five senses, each displayed separately for investigation by the viewer.30 The woman, observed "unawares" by the au-
dience in the darkened theater, is caught in a vortex of pleasure. She is further situated as object of the male gaze through the reclined looks of the priest on stage. Their presence also signals the religiosity of the act (Being priests, they provide no competition for a white heterosexual male viewer in the audience but do pro-
vide adequate gender identification.)

At first glance, it appears that any displeasure that may be aroused in a male viewer by the woman's ability to sexually satisfy herself is soon banished by the reassu-
rance that she rejects her own pleasure/power for spiritual fulfillment. The potential terror of female sex-
uality would thus be constrained by the patriarchal law of the Father in the form of religion, which would
demonstrate the control of the orientals, women, and all people of color were seen as requiring. However, the dance also unites the goddess/whore duality within the figure of one woman, thus allowing for several possible readings. One reading reasserts the male viewer that even "asexual" women are really "women," that is,
defined by and reducible to their bodies. Other read-
ings might hold that women themselves are reposi-
tories of both relationships to sexuality, indulgence, and control; or that woman's pleasure in her own body is so seductive as to involve a constant struggle between ex-
pression and renunciation; or even that the pleasure of the senses is itself a transcendent spiritual experience.

That is, the recuperative effect of the religious framing remains ambiguous, allowing for multiple responses. Scopophilic pleasures of this sort are allowed in high art under certain conditions. St. Denis's contem-
porary, the Austrian writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal,

characterized this requirement when he stated that, al-
though Radha "borders on voluptuousness, . . . it is
chaste."31 The mechanism that allows this audience/performer link can be described as what Michel Fou-
cult calls the "confessional" mode.

The Pleasures of the Confessional Mode

One way of looking at the dynamics of meaning in
Radha, with its religious discourse, is in the form of a Christian confession. The confessional structure is a rit-
ual expression, a truthful telling of forbidden behav-
ior, especially—as Foucault emphasizes in The History of Sexuality—"sexual behaviour. It requires a speaker
and listener (performer and audience).32 The act of
telling "excoriates, redens, and purifies the confess-
or, and promises him or her salvation.33 Its redemptive
promise simultaneously allows, while disavowing, the ill-
licit pleasures of prurient interest on the part of the
audience.

Foucault indicates how the range of the confes-
sonal form expanded after the Reformation. By the
end of the nineteenth century this range extended into
a series of relationships, including those between psy-
chiatrists and patients and delinquents and experts, and it also took several rhetorical forms such as autobi-
ographical narratives and published letters.3 I would
add to this list the relationship between Radha and her audience as it functioned in performance. It was the
supposed moral superiority of the viewing audience
that was being played to and reinforced in Radha's dis-
play and renunciation of the pleasures of her own
body. Linda Nochlin has, in her discussion of oriental-
ism, pointed to this type of viewing experience a "tongue-clicking and lip-smacking response."35

The confessional mode interlocked with St. Denis's
own way of conceiving of her work. St. Denis's belief
in the Delasarte meaningfulness of movement, and her conviction that her dancing demonstrated the uni-
ity of the individual spirit with god (formulated in
Christian Science as androgynous, or beyond sexual-
ity), framed her work in moral justification. The con-

fessional mode, as a way of structuring a relationship between performer and spectator, framed sexuality as art and art as moral uplift. Given St. Denis's position as a
woman choreographer, then a rarity, I believe that her utilization of these discourses of morality enabled her to subvert the contemporary standards for "re-
respectable" women's display of their own sexuality. In

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In doing so, however, she also reproduced traditional pa-
triarchal designations of that sexuality.

The tensions between the sexuality of the work and its artistic and spiritual framing are reflected in the
contemporary critical response. Von Hofmannsthal
captured the crux of the dance: "It is consecrated to the
senses, but it is higher." Similarly, a British critic called
Radha "athletic in its actuality and ascetic in its refine-
ment. The reviewer for the Boston Herald could not
help noting that St. Denis's body is that of a woman
divinely planned but insisted that "there is no atmos-
phere of sex about her."36

Foucault's work can take us farther in a considera-
tion of sexuality and spectatorship. Foucault points out the similarity between two modes of production of
truth, the confessional and the scientific discourse.37
Both were utilized in the expanding nineteenth-
century discourses of sexuality, and both implied a will
to knowledge that reflected a socially inscribed power
to investigate, to judge, and ultimately to reform or
punish. In Radha, both of these discourses come to
gether. The ethnographic urge to represent the other for the pleasure and uses of the representative38 com-

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bines with the display of sexuality sanctified by the con-

fessional code. The result for the audience is a doubly
inscribed "right to look," further enhanced by racial

ideologies.39

In white Western discourse, both non-whites and non-Westerners are coded as extremely or excessively
sexual. The dark (St. Denis used dark body paint in
the first versions) goddess from the erotic East, then,
implies a surfeit of sexuality. Even when St. Denis
switched to a body suit of her own flesh color in later
versions, either for reasons of propriety or merely for
convenience, she was still perceived as a Hindu god-


dess, and we know that at that time in North America, Hindus were perceived as black. In one of the first performances, when a Hindu first entered carrying a tray of incense, an audience member jotted in black dialect, "Who wants de Waitah?" The racial implication was so clear that the company did not tour south of the Mason-Dixon line because of the Jim Crow laws.

St. Denis was, of course, known by her audience to be white. Her portrayal of a woman of color had the effect of sexualizing her in the audience's mind. This is similar to the device used in nineteenth-century odaliskic paintings where the association of black women with whites served as a clue to the sexual knowledge or availability of the white women. Similarly, while St. Denis is Western, she is here linked to the sensuous, eternal feminine represented by the East.

These several dynamics function to enhance the audience's right to look sexually at the respectable white middle-class woman on the stage. The racial and cultural displacement of Radha is precisely what enhances the success of the confessional mode in the context of art. It is this hyperbole of otherness and its reinforcing linkages between ideological notions of race, gender, and non-Westernness that, I suspect, was the key to this dance's popularity.

Conclusions

But if we leave the analysis at that, we fail to consider fully the dynamics of live performance. After all, the representation of Radha is not a story, where the priestess Radha might be imagined, or a painting, where she might be displayed and observed, but a live performance. As I have already mentioned, the middle-class white woman's body is central to the production of pleasure in the relationship of these three markers of otherness as discussed above. But it is also the factor that ultimately confounds binary constructions of meaning. In the ludic or dreamlike space of performance, the performer is both white and non-white, Western and Eastern, and female while usurping the male role of choreographer. (Remember that at that time, although most dancers were female, very few dances were choreographed by women.)

What issue of spectatorship and the production of meaning does these complications raise? At the very least, they unsettle the binarisms of the ideologies that undergird racism, sexism, and orientalism. The element of mastery, however, implied by the right to represent the "other," remains.

But if we look at the choreography, with its combination of skirt-dancing turns, ballet steps, and "Indian" gestures, something else becomes apparent. The dance itself serves as a sign of the cultural process of "othering" through representation—an ongoing process of construction that is always reflexive with regard to the culture that produces it. The representative codes of vaudeville skirt-dancing collide with iconic signs of Indianness, mixing with and overlaying one another as a sign of cultural interaction and continually renegotiated meaning. Although there is no Brechtian self-reflexivity built into the theatrical structure of Radha, implicit in every performance is the spectator's awareness of the construction of an illusion. Because of its existence as a temporal art—and a three-dimensional one that is dependent on the physical presence of the performer in the same space as the audience (i.e., not sculpture, not film, not literature)—live performance must produce a convincing linkage of similarity and difference. The performer is both herself or herself and the character who is portrayed. Performance presents this as a dialectical relationship, always in negotiation.

Drawing on psychoanalytic film theories of spectatorship, I could argue that St. Denis as a white Westerner provides an avenue of psychological identification for her white Western audience. Framed by the essentialist, transcendent spirituality of the piece, the audience is brought into ego identification with the white as non-white and the Western as Eastern. At the same time, the voyeuristic and fetishistic aspects of the dance (enhanced by its construction as spectacle) objectify it as separate from the observer. A "colored" white woman (since this is not caricature of the minstrel-show variety) also evokes an ambiguous response. While "mixing" sexualizes the white woman, it simultaneously indicates a potential mixing of the races, legally proscribed at the time. If ideologies are based on binary constructions of difference necessary to the maintenance of hegemony, performance thus signifies the ambiguity of such binary constructions and their true dialectical function in the production of meaning.

Certainly St. Denis's rise to fame and her ability to present herself in respectable theaters as a woman alone on the stage is emblematic of the social changes in the women's sphere at the turn of the century. Still, her work remains conservative in its assertion of spirituality as the realm of woman and also in its presentation of woman's body as sexualized. One of St. Denis's achievements was to unite these supposed opposites. Some critics have begun to pose questions theorizing the body in performance. Questions of the power of representation become more complex when acted out on and through a material body. Is the female appropriation of sexual display in live performance, even within patriarchal norms, an act that in some way threatens the hegemony of patriarchy? That so much of the sexual pleasure in Radha is danced as self-pleasure (especially Radha's self-caressing) on the one hand asserts a new empowerment for woman and on the other belongs to traditional structures of pornographic viewing.

In any performance, the venue and the particularities of audience are essential to the generation of meaning. Certainly the meanings activated by the first performance for spectators who had just watched boxing and were soon to see trained monkeys, were somewhat different from those generated by the same piece in a "respectable" theater, framed as "art." Different still is the reception of Radha by our students today who dutifully sit through St. Denis films in dance history seminars.

What the investigation of a piece like Radha can provide is an example of the necessity of unraveling the multiple strands of ideological meaning that are present in any work of performance and that are variously activated in specific viewing situations. For instance, similar doublings of race, exoticism, and sexuality are played out in Josephine Baker's famous "banana dance." As a black woman, however, her construction as "exotic" never played as successfully in North America as in Europe.

As we reconsider the canon of dance history and integrate it with gender studies, it is not enough to ask how St. Denis conceived of her work, or how it relates to the dance history that precedes and follows it. Nor is it enough to ask how St. Denis's work reflected the changing roles of women in her day, or to note stylistic similarities between dance and other types of artistic products in the same historical period. All of these investigations produce valuable information and should not be ignored. But as scholars we must also look more deeply at the mechanisms of meaning on which the performance hinges and investigate the role of live display of the female body in activating those mechanisms, as I have attempted to do in this essay. Only by more fully comprehending the production of ideology in every sphere of social construction, including the female body in performance, can we begin to sever the invisible links that bind racism, sexism, and cultural imperialism so tightly together.

Notes

My thanks to Jennifer Wicke and Virginia Domínguez for commenting on earlier drafts of this article and to Victoria Vandenberg for research assistance.

1. Susan Leigh Foster's excellent Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) is, as of this writing, the only extended treatment of dance history to draw on theories of semiotics and on the historiographic work of Hayden White to construct a new model for a poetics of dance. This work focuses on developing paradigms for approaching various types of choreography but does not make race, gender, or class central components of its analysis.
3. See Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theatrizing the Female Spectator," Screen 21, nos. 3-4 (September-October 1983): 74-89, for a discussion of related concerns and references to relevant articles.
6. For the works that discuss Radha as part of the general passion for the exotic at the turn of the century, see Elizabeth Kendall, Where She Danced: The Birth of American Art Dance (1979; reprint, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Nancy Lee Chaffer Ruyter, Reformers and Visionaries: The Americanization of the Art of Dance (New York: Dance Horizons Press, 1979); Christina L. Schlundt, "Into the Mystic and Miss Ruth," Dance Perspectives, no. 46 (summer 1975). Foster and Shelton also situate the work in terms of eutectics.
9. Ibid.
10. I rely on my viewing of a 1942 filmed version of St. Denis performing Radha, a print of which is housed in the Dance Collection of the Lincoln Center Library, New York. I draw also on Shelton's verbal reconstruction of the dance, based on her viewing of the 1942 film and supplemented by her review of St. Denis's papers housed at Lincoln Center.
12. Ibid., 51.
13. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 90.
16. Ibid., 5.
17. Ibid., 90.
18. Ibid., 206.
19. Ibid., 208.
20. Ibid., 93.
21. Ibid., 206.
22. Ibid., 40, 206.
23. Ibid., 167.
24. Ibid., 29.
26. Ibid., 331.
28. Ibid., 21.
29. Ibid., 46.
30. Ibid., 21.
31. Vsadeville at this time reflected both its "coarser" origins in variety shows for male audiences and its newer respectability as it targeted a growing middle-class (male and female) audience. St. Denis's work, a respectable presentation of sexuality, fit well with changing codes of performance. Shelton notes: "As ladies began to patronize high-class variety, the atmosphere of the theater became even more self-conscious, with elaborate rationales required to justify the display of female bodies. Scantily clad women appeared as "living statues" or in tableaux that duplicated famous paintings or biblical episodes" (Divine Dancer, 25).
32. Ibid., 14.
33. Ibid., 91.
35. Ibid., 90.
36. Ibid., 5.
37. Ibid., 90.
38. Ibid., 206.
39. Ibid., 208.
40. Ibid., 93.
41. Ibid., 206.
42. Ibid., 206.
43. Ibid., 167.
44. Notes of registration were not limited to the West. Said notes that in view of the conditions under colonialism, the Western "Orientalist found it his duty to rescue some portion of a lost, past classical Oriental grandeur" (ibid., 29) in order to ameliorate conditions in the present. In other words, the Westerner could now represent the Orient as it was, or should be, not only to himself but also to the Orientals, restoring to them glimpses of their past glories. St. Denis participated in this process when she toured the Orient in 1932-36. Her dances, constructed primarily from library research and from inspiring pictures, were warmly received in India, Japan, and other countries.
45. In India, her respectability may have contributed to a renewal of prestige for traditional classical dancing. However, as one critic noted (see Shelton, Divine Dancer, 199), there may have been some irony in the situation for the Indian audiences as they watched a white woman dance a temple dance that was, at the time, usually performed by prostitutes.
46. Said, Orientalism, 155.
48. Ibid., Orientalism, 253.
50. Said, Orientalism, 155.
52. Race theories proposed a division of races into advanced (white) and backward (non-white) categories, just as orientalist thought divided the world into the strong, progressive, advanced West and the weak, primitive, degenerate East. Colonial expansion was seen as proof of the triumph of the fittest.
54. Laura Mulvey's article remains a cornerstone for psychoanalytic critical theories of spectatorship in film. She draws on Lacan's extension of Freud's work on ego formation and the construction of sexual subjectivity to develop a theory of visual pleasure based on voyeurism and fetishism. Her work opposes notions of the social construction of the female as spectacle, i.e., "to-be-looked-at," to that of the male as active narrative agent. These ideas have important implications for developing a related theory of spectatorship for live performance. Following Mulvey, I believe that staging Radha as a spectacle (see "Spectacle" section under Radha, above) enhances the voyeuristic and fetishistic production of pleasure.
55. Quoted in Shelton, Divine Dancer, 61.
57. Ibid., 62.
58. Ibid., 63.
60. Quotes from Shelton, Divine Dancer, 64. Note also that Shelton, who calls Radha a "visual orgasm," acknowledges the mixed message in the piece and its orientalist content. But in her discussion of these qualities she merely states, "This mixed message stemmed from St. Denis's own stage personality and, by extension from the quality of the gestures," which reflected her background as an unassuming New Jersey farm girl (64-65). The intricate dialectic between East and West remains submerged in a discussion of individual artistry.
61. Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 64.
63. I am using the term "right to look" as it is developed by Jane Gaines in her "White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory," Cultural
Critique 4 (fall 1986): 59–79. She refers to culturally proscribed economies of vision as they are delineated along lines of race, gender, and class.

63. Quoted in Shelton, Divine Dancer, 54.

64. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies," 240.

65. The class alignment or consignment of successful performers during that time was complex. "Respectable" artists often socialized with the elite, yet remained a class apart, somewhat beyond the pale. In terms of her class origins, St. Denis came from a family relatively poor in economic capital, but rich in educational capital (to use Bourdieu's distinction). Her mother was trained as a doctor, although she did not practice, and her father was an inventor. Certainly, St. Denis's self-presentation in her adult life ("respectably" married to her partner Ted Shawn, for example) indicated an alignment with the middle class.


67. Brecht's theories of theater emphasized the notion of distanciation, or the "alienation effect." By means of such devices as self-reflexivity his plays keep spectators aware that they are participating in the construction of a fiction; they thus avoid the conventions of realism that serve to naturalize ideology. See Bertolt Brecht, Brecht on Theatre, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964).

68. The situation is somewhat different with film. While the image composed of reflected light is less material than a play in performance, the evidentiary nature of the photographic image carries with it a strong coding of realism. In some ways, film can allow for a stronger identification (and temporary loss of the sense of self as separate from the fiction) than live performance. The complexities of this relationship between film and live performance will have to be considered as film theory is adapted to performance analysis.


Two-Stepping to Glory:
Social Dance and the Rhetoric of Social Mobility
JULIE MALNIG

The popularity of classic dancing grows greater every day. It has won its place in American life. Everywhere the dancer is in demand. Starling salaries are paid. And those who can dance for charitable entertainments or for the pleasure of their friends, quickly become social favorites.

—SERGEI MARINOFF, "I Can Teach You to Dance Like This,"
Dance Lovers Magazine, November 1922

Dance—particularly social dance—has long had an association with the attainment, or at least the preservation and display, of social status, from the Renaissance court spectacles and balls of Queen Elizabeth, to nineteenth-century New York Cotillions. The editor of The Director, a nineteenth-century magazine on "dancing and deportment," describes dance lessons offered at the Knapp Mansion in Brooklyn for children of the middle class where "the absolute necessity of knowing how to dance is, of course, apparent to persons who go much into society." The American debutante ball is a classic example of social dance serving as the gateway for entrance into one's social community.

The style and format of nineteenth-century American dance, from which exhibition ballroom dance emerged, carried with it the European tradition of ballroom dance as a symbol of decorum and good social breeding. But how, specifically, did the alignment between dance, social status, and "social mobility" become expressed in the ballroom dances of the early twentieth century? What did the concept of social mobility mean in the early years of the Progressive era when the United States was undergoing significant transformations in its social consciousness? What I show here is how the concepts of progress and social mobility, social ideals much in the forefront of the minds of Americans, become enmeshed in the very fabric of the ballroom dance practices and contexts themselves. I will explore how both professional and recreational dancers used the dances and their attendant meanings as ways of adjusting to this rapidly changing cultural climate.

The early teens, in particular, present a fascinating case study for the dance historian examining the relationship between dance and social context. Historians concur that during this time nothing short of a cultural revolution occurred. The country was re-orienting itself to major cultural and technological developments in the wake of industrialization, among them an emerging consumer culture, massive immigration, a burgeoning middle class, and large-scale movements from rural to urban areas. These developments, in turn, led to a wide-ranging re-evaluation of social values and mores including relationships between the sexes, women's role in society, and concepts of morality and sexuality. As the cities became meccas for industry and commerce, a host of new social institutions emerged there, such as cabarets and hotels, dance halls, theatres, movies, and amusement parks. In this publicly oriented cul-